



A SWEET BRIDE
TO HEAL HIS
WOUNDED
HEART

EVELYN BOYETT

THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME

A Sweet Bride To Heal His Wounded Heart

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

Evelyn Boyett

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Also By Evelyn Boyett

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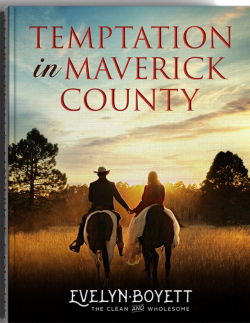
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The sun rose between two prominent peaks of the Sierra

Nevada Mountains. It was hard to believe anyone would want to live anywhere else except California; Humble Creek to be exact.

The world was recovering from a damaging war back east that affected so many lives. It would seem a world away had the unpleasantness not personally affected the Anders family. The mountains were no protection from the ravages of war, but they were trying hard to continue with their life in the beautiful central California valley.

To the north and south of Humble Creek, there were fewer farms and more towns that had sprung up as a result of gold. As the mines became used up, the men who came looking for streets of gold stayed around and joined up with gangs; becoming outlaws. Their likes were seeping into lovely towns like Humble Creek and staking their claim. It was a constant battle to keep things calm and safe.

Abigail Anders was known for her positive attitude and perseverance. She sprang out of bed early to get started on chores, before anyone else was awake. Abigail loved dawn on Hopewell Farm.

She felt as if she had all of California to herself and got work done quickly with no one to slow her down. Uncle John wasn't bossing her. And Abigail's mother, Jane, wasn't fretting. She was sure Abigail would harm herself doing chores normally reserved for a man. Abigail had spent most of her life being underestimated but she never let anyone down.

Abigail's Pa Ezra Anders taught her the skills she relied on to finish her chores lickety-split. Before leaving to fight in the war for the Union, he taught Abigail self-confidence. Mr. Anders always told his only daughter that she was as capable as any man. It's almost like he knew that someday her family would rely on her.

Abigail could chop wood faster than most and ride a horse even faster than he could. Ezra knew outlaws were closing in on peaceful towns like Humble Creek and he thought it important that Abigail knew how to defend herself.

Ezra Anders was gone at present, but Abigail had faith that one day he'd return. Ezra was an honest man who kept his word – at least he was before the war. Abigail would hold out hope that he'd return until she drew her last breath. Most people, including her mother thought Abigail was foolish. Another thing Abigail's father taught her was not to pay attention to what others thought, so she kept on hoping.

Abigail did learn one thing from her mother Jane; despite her tomboy ways, it was important to be a lady. It wasn't always easy being both, but Abigail managed. Her golden hair hung long down her back in a single braid and her green eyes sparkled in the sunshine.

Abigail had a light spray of freckles across her nose which she kept from dominating her face by always wearing a bonnet or a straw

hat with a ribbon. Abigail looked dainty but she was strong as an ox. She kept smelling nice by rubbing lavender in her hair.

Abigail reserved her favorite light blue dress for occasions when her femininity would come in handy or was appropriate. Her green every-day dress wasn't fancy, but she wore a clean apron when the old one was soiled. In the very early hours when she wouldn't be seen, Abigail got away with wearing trousers. It didn't offend the chickens and cows as far as she could tell.

It was May and everything was blooming. The rainy winter lasted until mid-April, which meant a vibrant pallet of colors cloaked the meadow. Abigail ran her fingers along the tops of the long grass as she ran across the meadow to the barn.

There were poppies, white clover, blue buttons and many more flowers that were a feast for the eyes. Abigail reached the barn and went straight for the buckets to begin milking. She whistled a tune as she completed her chores faster than a jackrabbit. Baskets hung neatly by the chicken coop which she filled with eggs from the brooding birds. The animals welcomed Abigail and were used to her showing up early every day and moving very fast.

Next was the garden, which would be producing within a couple of months – if everything went well. There would be juicy tomatoes, an abundance of lettuce, squash, beans and much more. A border of chives kept the deer away, which was a trick old Mr. Campbell taught Abigail. He lived two farms over, and most thought he was a grumpy old man, but Abigail found him amusing.

Abigail pulled weeds that popped up among the neat rows of plants. If they weren't plucked every day, they'd destroy the garden. The rooster cawed as Abigail picked the last weed. She finished just in time and ran back to the ranch house, careful not to

be seen. If Uncle John laid eyes on Abigail, there would be serious explaining to do. Abigail tiptoed across the front porch, in the door, and up the stairs to her brother Thomas' room.

"I'm done, Thomas. I managed to get in and out of the house without anyone catching sight of me," Abigail said in a hushed tone.

Thomas smiled weakly at his sister. "Thank you, Abigail. I'll never know what I did to deserve your kindness."

The war had not only negatively affected Ezra Anders, Abigail's father, but her brother Thomas as well. Thomas was a student of the highest caliber and he had talked of getting an advanced degree in science. He wanted to learn about plants so that Hopewell Farm would have an abundant harvest every year.

He was fascinated by how things worked and making them work better. He had a sweetheart who he was sure to marry, and he was the friendliest man in town. If he wanted to be the mayor of Humble Creek, he would have been unanimously elected. Thomas was a strong muscular man with clear brown eyes and a thick head of hair.

Now, Thomas Anders was a shell of his former self. His eyes were sunken, and a scraggly beard hung off his face. As far as Abigail knew, Thomas hadn't spoken to his sweetheart, Martha, since his return.

He didn't have the energy to lift himself out of bed and he was becoming a hermit who limited interaction with everyone. Abigail knew how bad things were with Thomas, so she jumped in to help, doing his chores for him without her Ma or Uncle John knowing.

“You’d do the same for me Thomas and I don’t mind waking up early. It suits me.” Abigail sat on Thomas's bedside. Soon she heard the heavy footsteps of Uncle John coming to check on Thomas, which he did most mornings.

“Howdy. Have you completed your chores, Thomas?” Uncle John asked in his deep voice.

“They are complete,” Thomas said.

His answer showed a glimmer of the former Thomas Anders because it wasn’t a lie. Uncle John didn’t need to know Abigail had cared for the animals and tended the garden. Thomas prided himself on not telling lies and that hadn’t changed. The one thing Thomas didn’t want to do was get his cherished sister in trouble.

"Good man," John said as he slapped Thomas' back. "That's what a strong Anders man does. War may have knocked you down for a bit, but I knew you'd get back on the horse. I can feel you worked up a sweat. Be sure to have your sister cook you a hearty breakfast so you'll have the energy to do it all again in the morning." John walked out of the room and slammed the door. Thomas winced. Loud noises still upset him because they were constant reminders of the battlefield.

“I dread the day he finds out what a worthless fool I am. If it weren’t for you, Abigail, I’d be turned out on the street. I should have just gone away like father,” Thomas said.

“Don’t talk like that Thomas. I need you here on Honeywell farm and you’re not a worthless fool. Living here with mother and Uncle John and no one to turn to – ugh, it would be unbearable. Ma has a negative attitude and Uncle John can be brusque at times. Don't get me wrong, Thomas, I love them both." Abigail stood and

composed herself so Ma didn't suspect she'd been laboring.

"Would you mind pulling the curtains before you leave. The sunlight makes my already painful headache worse." Thomas pulled the blanket over his head and retreated into his own world.

Abigail did so and then bounded down the stairs taking them two at a time and joined her Ma, Jane, in the kitchen.

"I pulled ham from the smokehouse. Get working on the red-eye gravy," Jane Anders said to her daughter. "Were you outdoors? Whatever do you do so early in the morning?"

"The flowers in the meadow are showing their colors for a short time. I don't want to miss a single bloom," Abigail said. She tried to change the subject to eggs, so she commented on how many had double-yolks.

"Oh, Abigail. Your head is in the clouds as always. You're a dreamer like your father was before the war. Luckily for him, most of what he dreamed came true. All that luck was lost on the battlefield, I suppose." She said as tossed the ham in the hot fat. "What are your plans today? I could use help with the washing. And the mending, too."

"I plan to run to the post office to see if Pa has written. He even found the time to write during the war, so I'm bound to receive something soon," Abigail said optimistically.

Jane got a sad look on her face and gave Abigail a pat on the shoulder. "My dear, don't hold out hope. Your Pa left and if he's still alive, he's not coming back. Ezra Anders left a good piece of his mind back east and maybe he went looking for it."

Abigail had learned to close her mind to her Ma's nay-saying. It wasn't in Abigail's nature to believe the worst would happen because without hope there was nothing. There were times she felt like her hope was all that was holding the family farm together.

Uncle John was doing his best to help in the absence of Ezra Anders, but it seemed only a matter of time until he gave up and moved to the city. Abigail, however, wasn't going to let that happen.

"We need salt and sugar from the general store so I'm going into town anyway. It'll be good to give Nutmeg some exercise. Don't remember when my horse was last coaxed into a good gallop."

"You're going to fall off that dang horse and break your neck," Jane joked.

"Don't worry so much, Ma. Pa taught me how to fall in the right way. I may be sore for a day or two, but I won't break any bones. If I tumble from Nutmeg, I'll brush myself off and climb back on." Abigail remembered that Uncle John said something similar about Thomas.

He was right about her brother getting back on the horse, but it was going to take time. "I'm going to bring Thomas his breakfast because I know he's exhausted from doing all of his chores. He deserves a snooze for all the work he did," Abigail said.

"He's a strong one that Thomas. I'm proud of him for not running away like his Pa. This farm wouldn't stay afloat without your brother's hard work," Jane said of her son.

Abigail was amazed that neither her Ma nor Uncle John knew that Thomas rarely moved from his bed. She would continue to help

Thomas because she couldn't bear to lose another member of her family.

Chapter 2

In a field lying still and unable to move his legs. Isaac Cully was surrounded by infantrymen; most of them bloodied and crying out in pain.

The only thing louder than the men's cries was the sound of firing guns and cannon explosions. Men were climbing over his useless body as if he was not there. Isaac felt utterly alone and when he called out to his fellow soldiers they didn't respond. They were solely concerned with saving their own lives.

Isaac didn't blame them because he was but one soldier among thousands. It was difficult to see what was coming at him because of the gun-smoke and the blood running down into his eyes from his forehead. An explosion went off behind his left ear, it was deafening. Isaac opened his mouth to scream but before he got out the sound, he saw the light.

Isaac was stunned and screamed before realizing he was not on the battlefield. He was on a train heading for Humble Creek California. He was escaping the memories of war, but they still existed in his dreams. His head throbbed.

Isaac ran his fingers through his curly black hair and rubbed his hazel eyes. Other passengers looked startled but only for a

moment. It didn't take long for them to realize that Isaac had been in the war and that it still haunted him.

Their looks of surprise quickly turned to pity, which was a look Isaac hated receiving. Men with memories and ghoulish dreams similar to Isaac's were everywhere and he was seeking to do something about it. He was running far away from the memories, in hopes that they would someday stop.

Isaac's cream-colored shirt was a shade darker because it was drenched in sweat. It was cold sweat and now Isaac had the chills, even though he was in a cramped hot train. Isaac's mind was racing like it did when his company was marching towards possible death at the hands of the Confederate Army.

Those marches did end in death for many and Isaac should feel lucky, but he didn't. The nightmares made Isaac feel like he'd be better off dead – transported from his constant anguish. He hoped that by transporting himself to California, he would not need to escape into death.

The elderly woman sitting next to Isaac gave him a nudge. "I'll keep you in my prayers. I lost both my boys in the war and sometimes I'm glad they aren't suffering anymore. I've seen the vacant look in your eyes before and I pray you find peace. Every soldier deserves at least that." She covered Isaac's trembling hand with hers.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm sorry for the loss of your boys. A new life awaits me in California, and I have hope for my future."

Isaac ran into people like the elderly woman from time to time and their prayers were always welcome. They certainly couldn't hurt.

As Isaac looked out at the changing landscape from the train window, Isaac was mesmerized by the colors that didn't exist in Boston. Purples so vibrant he had to look away and swaying orange blooms that looked like miniature suns. The meadows were carpeted in colors and Isaac wished he were a painter who could capture it all. Isaac closed his eyes and reflected on his life in Boston. Before the war, it was a good life; a life with promise.

Isaac owned a store in Boston that sold mostly leather goods including boots, hats, satchels, and gloves. It was a tannery and people came from all over to buy their durable products. It was the Curry family store but now his older brothers were dead and reliving memories each day became too difficult to handle.

Ladd Curry was the eldest and he had done most of the sewing. Ladd was smart, funny and an excellent marksman. He rose through the ranks of the Union Army quickly, which made him a target. He was the first of Isaac's brothers to die. He died quickly with a bayonet to the chest.

Isaac was in his brother's company and saw Ladd die. Next was Michael who died a slower death. He was involved in a skirmish and his leg was wounded. They took the leg, but it was too late. The infection traveled and he perished. Sam was captured by the confederates and killed.

Isaac couldn't go for an hour in the store after the war without thinking of his brothers. Reminders were everywhere and it was time to go. Isaac's younger brother, Joshua, would take over the store when he was old enough.

They deserved a peaceful Curry family that wasn't affected by the war. By leaving, Isaac was giving them a chance at happiness. Isaac hoped that being away from Boston might afford him the

opportunity to remember Ladd, Michael, and Sam as the fun-loving men they were before the war.

Isaac took the purchase document for Magnolia Hill Farm out of his pack. Holding the deed and dreaming of a fresh start in Humble Creek warmed his heart. He read the description of the farm so many times that he had it committed to memory.

There were rows of citrus trees – lemons and oranges. Isaac couldn't wait to reach up and pick an orange – he might faint from excitement. After enjoying the shade and aroma of the trees Isaac could walk out onto miles of cropland. The fertile land was great for planting corn, potatoes, wheat or whatever struck Isaac's fancy.

Closer in towards the house was room for a garden, where food would be at his fingertips. Cattle were able to graze on the vast meadows, which would be available for sale when he reached Humble Creek. Owning livestock was a dream of Isaac Curry's and soon it would be fulfilled.

"Are you meeting a girl? I ask because of the smile that's come over you," The elderly woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Ramsey asked.

Isaac smiled. "No, ma'am. I'm looking to get established before I go looking for a wife. I'm heading to Humble Creek where fruit grows on trees and men aren't killing each other. I've spent my time on the battlefield and now I want to be a simple farmer."

"I hope your dream comes true, Isaac. It sounds delightful." Mrs. Ramsey was polite and meant no harm, which was just the type of people Isaac hoped to meet in Humble Creek.

Across the aisle on the train was a man who was listening to their

conversation. "Don't forget to watch your back while you're busy smelling the flowers. Names Dan and I made that mistake once. Got robbed of all my belongings." He snickered.

"This happened in Humble Creek?" Isaac asked.

"Sure did. Outlaws are everywhere from the north all the way down to Mexico territory. You got a gun? I'm not talking about a rifle for your homestead but one for your hip." Dan asked.

"I was on the battlefield with the Union Army. I left with two things – my life and this here gun." Isaac pulled aside his coat and showed off his polished gun. "It saved my life on more than one occasions and I'm not afraid to use it."

"Good because I hate to see people coming all the way to California, thinking it's something it ain't."

"It's not Boston or Philadelphia – how bad can it be?"

"Good luck to you. I hope you escape what you're running from. I know of few men who have been able to outrun their pasts." Dan said as he pulled his hat down over his head.

The train attendant notified the passengers that Humble Creek would be the next stop. Isaac could not recall when the last time was that he'd been so excited. He thought that part of him was dead after the war but now he had Magnolia Hill Farm on the horizon.

He could almost taste the orange that he'd pluck from the tree in the morning. The scent of Magnolia trees was only a short time away, although Isaac had no idea what a Magnolia flower smelled like. As Isaac stood to stretch after being cramped for hours he

thought that being without a wife was to his advantage.

A woman would need to be cared for and Isaac knew he'd be too busy caring for himself. That part of his life would just have to wait. Isaac stood up and carried his sack over his shoulder. He wanted to be the first in line to get off in Humble Creek.

Isaac was sure to find Magnolia Hill Farm by sundown and enjoy his first night in California and with any luck, the nightmares would subside. Isaac was ready to start his new life. The train whistle blew and the locomotive slowed.

Chapter 3

Isaac Cully stepped on to the train platform with his belongings thrown over his shoulder. Besides the farm, everything he owned was in the heavy canvas bag. Isaac got rid of the leather one he used for years because it was made by his brother Ladd.

Instead of holding happy memories, it reminded Isaac of war and death. In his bag were a few small tools, a spare shirt, socks in need of mending and some odds and ends. At the last minute, before leaving Boston, Isaac had placed a Bible in the bag. He wasn't much of a church-goer and felt God had let him down, but he was open to welcoming God back – someday. Isaac took his first steps in California but he didn't see what he expected.

The main street was not what he had been imagining while on the long train ride to Humble Creek. Maybe that was for the best because if he knew what it looked like, his thoughts wouldn't have been as pleasant.

Isaac would describe it as worn down, although the foliage was delightful to look at. A general store with two floors stood at the center of town with a post office attached. Benches lined the porch in front. He assumed it was a place for the people of Humble Creek to gather and gossip. That was often the case at a post office.

Down the street was a saloon with red swinging doors; on the patch of dirt in front were a pair of swaying drunks. If Isaac looked long enough he assumed that he'd see them fall down in the dirt.

Down the road a bit was a white church with a steeple and he thought he could see a schoolhouse too. A squat structure with a black chimney spewing smoke looked like it was a blacksmith's shop and next to it was a house where a couple of shingles hung. A doctor and maybe a lawyer shared the space he guessed.

Folks milled about who were mostly wearing pulled down hats and not bothering to greet each other. If Isaac had to guess, he'd say no one in Humble Creek trusted the other.

The way people shuffled along quickly was curious. They seemed tense and in a hurry – maybe scared of something. Isaac thought about what Dan said on the train – watch your back. Isaac patted his hip and felt for his gun. Knowing it was there was reassuring, something Isaac hadn't expected to feel in Humble Creek.

Isaac would never know anything about Humble Creek or how the heck to get to his farm unless he asked. He walked up to a gentleman coming from the general store, better to avoid the saloon. "Hello, I'm new to Humble Creek. My name is Isaac Cully and I'm looking for Magnolia Hill Farm. I bought the place and I was hoping you could direct me." Isaac said in the friendliest tone he could muster.

The man had a black hat, beard and a patch over one eye. He looked Isaac over from head to toe before grumbling something about not being sure where it was. Then he walked away.

"Have a good day, Sir," Isaac said. The man said nothing in return. Isaac tried with several more men and he got the same reaction. It

turned out that the grumble he got from the first man was the most anyone was willing to say to a stranger.

Isaac quickly stopped telling folks to have a nice day. Isaac tapped a man on the shoulder and he instinctively pulled out his gun and pointed it at Isaac. That almost sent Isaac back into a cold sweat because it was too close to the way it was during the war. What the heck were people afraid of in Humble Creek?

Isaac walked into the post office where he hoped they were accustomed to greeting strangers. A woman with her grey hair piled high atop her head and severe features stared at Isaac with black eyes when he walked in. She said nothing so Isaac figured it was up to him. "I hope you can help me, the name's Isaac Cully. I'm new to Humble Creek and this is where I intend to put down roots. I'm looking from Magnolia Hill Farm. Can you help me?"

She folded her hands and stood silent behind the counter. She shrugged. "Maybe it's east of town?" She remained erect and said nothing more. Isaac turned and walked back to the road. All eyes were upon him, which made him feel uncomfortable. Crows circled overhead, adding to the ominous feel of Humble Creek. A shiver came over Isaac.

Isaac kicked the dirt off his leather boots and decided to do what he did best - rely on himself. Isaac dropped his bag on the road and reached inside for his map, which he hadn't thought he'd need. The only structure included in the crude drawing was the saloon. An arrow pointed down towards a road going south.

The windy road didn't look like much but somewhere down there was Magnolia Hill Farm, so Isaac started walking. The townsfolk who seemed scared of him watched as he walked away. They probably hoped he'd keep walking and never be heard from again.

As the town of Humble Creek faded from sight, Isaac started to appreciate the beauty of the land. It was nothing like Boston or any place he had been back east. To the left of the winding trail were the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They cast a shadow on the land, but the sun showed through the jagged peaks.

Above the timberline were snow capped peaks; the mountains were so high however that it was warm where he traveled. The air was fresh and for the first time in years, the smell of death was cleared from Isaac's memory. The winds blew warm but not hot; Isaac shed his heavy sheepskin coat as he walked. Above, hawks soared without moving their wings. They glided through the sky using nothing but the power of the wind.

Wild roses grew all over the land, which was generally flat with undulating hills. Aside from the imposing mountains to his left, of course. Seeing signs that things were growing in the area made Isaac think that he was getting closer to Magnolia Hill Farm.

Isaac had learned to keep his canteen full at all costs and he was thankful for that tip he learned in the war. He reached into his bag and took a long drink from his canteen as he looked at the sun, lowering behind the peaks of the mountains.

Isaac was beginning to think he wouldn't find his farm before nightfall. The blanket he carried was threadbare and one could practically see through it, but there were worse places to spend the night. He knew that for a fact.

Isaac was keeping his eyes open for a spot to close his eyes when he heard hooves rushing behind him. It was the first sound, other than birds, that Isaac had heard for some time. Instinctively, he pulled his gun from its leather holster and pointed it at the person on the horse who was charging towards him.

Isaac took his finger off the trigger when he saw a beautiful woman with striking green eyes. Her hair cascaded behind her because her yellow bonnet had fallen back. He expected such a beauty to talk like an angel.

“Who in the sam hill are you and what business do you have, wandering towards my farm,” She asked firmly.

Isaac was wrong about the angel part, especially when she pulled out a gun. He didn't feel threatened, so he slowly placed his gun back. "I'm Isaac Cully, ma'am. I mean no harm and I'm heading to my own property – Magnolia Hill Farm. I have the document of the sale in my bag if you want to see it. I wouldn't be surprised if I was lost because I had no luck getting instructions in town. Point me in the right direction and I won't bother you anymore.”

Her features softened as she replaced her bonnet and even managed a smile. “You are going in the right direction, neighbor. My name is Abigail Anders and my family owns Hopewell Farm which is across from Magnolia Hill. I'd be willing to show you. I know a short cut. Unless you prefer walking in the dark.” She laughed.

“I'm trying to figure, Abigail, why you're so friendly when not one person in town so much as smiled. Not that I'm complaining because I appreciate the hospitality,” Isaac said.

He couldn't believe that the first person he really met in Humble Creek was so beautiful. She appeared capable too because she was riding alone and defending herself with a gun. Abigail clearly wasn't afraid to use it.

“People in town probably thought you were an outlaw. If there's a stranger in these parts, chances are – they're an outlaw,” Abigail

said as she rode beside him.

They continued to talk as she turned off the road and led them through a field. "I didn't hear outlaws were a problem in Humble Creek. Where'd they come from?"

"Hard to say really. I think they were traveling through and saw what a beautiful spot this was. The people of Humble Creek weren't ready for them when they came because we used to be a peaceful town. They robbed nearly every business in town and then started hitting the farms. The outlaws ride through town with their guns showing and intimidate the folks. It's only a matter of time before they take over Humble Creek completely."

"Have they gotten to Hopewell Farm?" Isaac asked. Abigail was so easy to talk to. He didn't want the conversation to end.

"No. And I'm a little insulted because they mustn't think we have much worth stealing," Abigail joked.

Isaac laughed. Abigail was not only beautiful and easy to talk to, but she was also funny. "Maybe it's because they've heard a woman lives on Hopewell farm owns a gun and isn't afraid to use it." They both laughed.

"What brings you to Humble Creek and how far did you come to reach our little town?" Abigail asked.

It was a reasonable question, but Isaac wasn't comfortable answering questions about his past. It meant talking about the war and the loss of his brothers. He might slip and tell her about his dreams and sensitivity to loud noises. A woman like Abigail Anders shouldn't have to hear about what war does to a man. Isaac decided to ignore that part of his history.

“Are you unwilling to answer?” Abigail asked because there was a long pause.

“Oh, no. I was taken by the flowering trees. They’re like nothing we had in Boston which is where I hail from. I owned a shop with my brothers,” Isaac said and hoped it was enough to satisfy Abigail’s curiosity.

“What kind of store? I bet it was a store that sold fine books. You seem the type that would read a great deal.” Abigail slowed her horse.

It was clear they were near their destination and the questions would be soon over.

“A tannery actually but I do enjoy reading,” Isaac said.

“Many good war stories have come to print. Are they of any interest to you?” Abigail asked.

“No, they are not, I prefer mysteries and scary tales. Why have you stopped? Is that Magnolia Hill Farm?” Isaac pointed.

“No, that’s my family’s farm.” Abigail pointed across the way. “That’s Magnolia Hill Farm.”

Isaac’s mouth was agape. There were no magnolia trees; in fact, there were no trees at all. Isaac’s dream of plucking fruit from trees was folly.

If there was a place to grow crops or a grazing pasture, they were covered in weeds. The house was a shambles with half the front porch collapsed and no stairs leading up to it. The front door was hanging off its hinges and the chimney was crumbling.

Isaac felt his heart sink and he threw his head in his hands. It would have been his worst day since the war but when he looked up there was Abigail.

Their eyes locked and without saying a word, Abigail Anders saved Isaac. Her green eyes danced, and she simply shrugged her shoulders. Isaac felt a warmth radiate through his body that he'd never felt before. For a quick moment, he felt optimistic.

Isaac wasn't going to let on that he felt an instant connection to Abigail – she'd think he was mad. In many ways, Isaac thought he was crazy because of the night sweats and flashbacks to his time on the battlefield. Although now he had Abigail to dream of and not war.

Chapter 4

Abigail tied Nutmeg to a post in front of the house. She had often wondered what would become of Magnolia Hill Farm. It had been unoccupied for years when the former owners left because of the outlaws.

It made sense that they sold it to someone who had never seen it. Isaac Curry had intense eyes that might have been easy-going once. His hair was nearly black with soft curls that weren't too long or too short.

He was rather handsome but he gave the impression that he had no idea of it. He made her heart race and caused butterflies to dance in her stomach. Abigail bit the inside of her cheek to yank herself out of her reverie. It was not the time to be concerned about a man's looks and presence.

Isaac walked back and forth in disbelief that he owned the monstrosity. "Abigail, can you tell me if I'll ever be able to grow anything here. I need to at least be able to come up with grazing land. Cattle aren't going to eat dirt."

Abigail couldn't help but let out a chuckle. "Excuse me, Isaac, I don't mean to make light of your situation. Honeywell farm is just a stone's throw away and we have no problem growing all sorts of

crops," she said as she started to walk the property.

Abigail found a sign that something would grow on the land. She leaned over and plucked a dandelion out of the dirt. Abigail walked up to Isaac and handed him the weed.

"There you have it. Proof that something will grow on Magnolia Hill Farm." Abigail smiled and Isaac did too. Their fingertips touched and Abigail felt a pulse journey throughout her body.

"I appreciate your positive attitude, Abigail. Really, I do but I am not going to be able to get this farm up and running. I put all my meager savings into buying the farm and I was lied about what to expect. The former owner said that I'd go to sleep and find that when I open my eyes the corn will have grown a foot. He told me that fruit hung heavy on the trees in the summer and vegetables would be enough to feed an army. Nothing appears to had been anything more than a fib. What happened the trees? Were there ever any namesake magnolias? I am going to return to Boston, a failure without a penny to my name," Isaac said as he hung his head low.

Abigail Anders had just met Isaac; two hours ago she had no idea the handsome man existed. She knew it didn't make sense to feel anxious at his mention of leaving Humble Creek for good. Abigail concluded that while it made no sense, it was how she felt. Isaac offered hope – hope for the future of Humble Creek and the safety of her family.

Most of the able-bodied men were run out of Humble Creek; having a good man moving in offered promise that things might get better. The town of Humble Creek could not let one more farm fall into the hands of the outlaws.

There had to be a rebellion against their evil ways, and it all might start with Isaac Curry. Abigail couldn't come out and tell Isaac that he might be the savior of Humble Creek that would be too much pressure. Abigail would hold back her thoughts – for now.

Abigail was thinking about her brother Thomas and how lucky Isaac was to escape the ravages of war. Someone like Isaac was just what her family and Hopewell Farm needed to survive. If he could make Magnolia Hill Farm succeed, it would be one success among many failures. It might be a new start. It could send a message to the outlaws that Humble Creek was not going to become a den of criminal mischief easily. Isaac Cully would prove that there were still men capable of being good stewards of the land. Men who were not going to be scared away easily.

Isaac glanced at Abigail with a look of despair in his hazel eyes. She had seen the look in her brother's eyes but brushed it off because Isaac hadn't mentioned being a soldier in the war. "Getting this land in working order would take an army of men. There is no way I can till the soil, rebuild the barn and the house. Not to mention afford animals and seeds to plant. I was lied to when the former owners said Magnolia Hill Farm was in working order," Isaac said.

"Isaac Cully, I don't know you well, but you don't strike me as a quitter. The orchard's to the west and it can be brought back to its former glory with some work. Barns and houses can be rebuilt. You managed to find the place despite the lack of help from the folks in town. You made it all the way to California," Abigail said as she began to scan the property to see if she thought it was hopeless as Isaac thought.

"Do you have a miracle idea, Abigail?" Isaac asked.

Abigail thought for a moment and gave Isaac the answer. “Miracles only happen with loads of hard work and the right people working together. I can offer my time every afternoon after I’m done with my chores. Don’t underestimate my strength or abilities. Working together we can get this farm back to working order.”

“I wouldn’t dare underestimate you, Abigail. You almost shot me a few hours ago.” Isaac chuckled. “As capable and hardworking as you are – this job can’t be done with just two.”

“I know that. All those people that looked away when you tried talking to them? They’ll listen to me. I’ll organize them and they’ll come help get Magnolia Hill Farm back up and running. If you’re someone who wants to improve Humble Creek, they’ll pitch in for sure.”

“I’ve been told about sure things before and look where it’s gotten me. Don’t those folk have farms of their own to worry about?” Isaac asked.

Abigail began to walk the land and Isaac followed as the sun set over the horizon. She had a purpose for walking across the seemingly barren land. Abigail was planting a seed in Isaac's mind – something he could sleep on. In the morning it would sprout, and he'd decide to stay. "That old house isn't too bad. You’ve got a pretty view of the mountains. Just imagine yourself sitting in a rocker on your front porch and watching the sunrise.” Abigail looked back and smiled.

“Abigail, I have no front porch,” Isaac pointed out.

“Not yet. Your future is there – you just have to imagine it,” Abigail said with encouragement. She noticed Isaac still held the dandelion in his hand so, at least he seemed to be thinking about

it.

“Where did you get your good attitude, Abigail. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. God made me pessimistic and things tend to turn out the way I predict,” Isaac said.

“My Pa and I spent a lot of time together when I was young, and I’m always told I’m a dreamer like him. Sometimes folks say that’s a bad thing but it’s just the way I am. It tend to look on the bright side.”

“Let me get this straight, your dream for this place is that it becomes a productive farm.”

“That’s it, Isaac Cully. If you don’t have dreams, then you can’t have dreams come true.” Abigail looked deep in Isaac’s eyes. His features had softened since he first set foot on his land. Abigail guessed that he might be softening to the idea of staying.

“Here’s the deal Abigail. I’m going into that house and looking for anything left behind that resembles a bed. Who knows, there might be outlaws or ghosts inside, and you’ll never see me again,” Isaac joked. “Seriously, I’ll sleep on your idea and give you an answer when the sun shines.”

Abigail offered her hand. “Let’s shake on it so I know you won’t up and disappear.” Isaac shook Abigail’s hand. The same feeling as before rushed through her body. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Good luck with the ghosts and scoundrels.”

Abigail walked towards Nutmeg whistling all the way. Her mother Jane was probably wondering where she’d been because a trip to the post office didn’t take half a day. Jane Anders would think

Abigail was foolish to try to convince a stranger to make something out of Magnolia Hill Farm. Abigail was so different from Jane in some respects that she couldn't believe they were kin. Her ma said she remembered giving birth to her. And they did look a lot alike, so they probably were genuine mother and daughter. Abigail laughed at her own joke.

Abigail crept up the stairs and cracked the door to Thomas' room. He was asleep as he shivered in a pool of sweat. Abigail was frightened the first time she saw her brother that way, but now she was used to it.

His memories of the unpleasantness he endured gave him terrible dreams. Abigail loved her brother so, that she wished she could take on his dreams - if only for one night. A good night's sleep would do Thomas well.

Unfortunately, Abigail couldn't do that, but she could do his morning chores. And morning came early, she reminded herself. Abigail yawned and went to bed. She dreamed of Isaac Cully.

When Abigail woke and couldn't fall back asleep, she glanced out the small window in her bedroom. It had a clear view of Magnolia Hill Farm and Isaac's ramshackle house.

Isaac must have come across a lantern because upstairs, where she imagined the bedroom would be, was a single light. Abigail thought that Isaac must be having a hard time sleeping too. She wondered what was swirling about in the mind of her handsome new neighbor.

Chapter 5

Isaac pushed aside the front door that was hanging onto the frame with a single nail. It fell behind him when he walked through and Isaac's foot fell through a rotting plank. It wasn't a good start and it only got worse. He lit a lantern he found outside and rodents scurried as bats flew. At least the varmints had found a nice place to live.

All Isaac Curry really cared about was finding a bed so he could get some sleep. He was so sleep deprived during the war that he started seeing things that weren't there. All Isaac needed at this point was to go crazier than he already was. He crept up the rickety staircase, which miraculously held under his weight and found himself a bedroom.

The biggest room upstairs seemed to be the only intact room in the house and it was empty. He was glad because a bed with a dirty mattress was the last thing he wanted. He'd rather sleep on the floor. At least *that* looked fairly clean. The door had been shut so the rodents hadn't got in.

Isaac sighed, pulled out his blanket and wrapped it around him, lying down on the cold floor.

For hours, Isaac tossed and turned. He finally decided that sleep

wasn't going to happen and figured he'd explore further.

Isaac found something that looked like a kitchen. A broken-down wood stove with a pipe running through the roof was the only thing in the room. He wasn't sure if the stove worked because it seemed pretty rusted. There must have been a leak in the roof somewhere.

Not that it mattered whether the stove worked or not because Isaac had nothing to cook – his stomach grumbled. There was a parlor with a hearth but no furniture, it was probably chopped up and used for firewood by the outlaws. Or perhaps the original owners had taken their furniture with them.

Isaac finally ended up outside again. The back porch led to a potting shed and it looked relatively intact. Benches and a few tools must have been overlooked by the miscreants, otherwise, they surely would have been burned in the hearth.

Seeds were scattered on the shelf, although not enough to plant a single row in the garden. Isaac smiled when he thought what Abigail would say about the seeds; she'd think they were a sign of hope and meant to be planted. Isaac didn't share her optimism.

He could think of no way how he could build something out of absolutely nothing. The previous owner made it sound as if he would move in and the farm would be perfect and run itself.

Isaac shook his head in disgrace at being so duped. After looking at the house he was more convinced than ever that he needed to walk away. Abigail Anders was a bright light in the disastrous situation but even she wasn't going to be able to convince Isaac to stay in Humble Creek. He was a broken man with no promise of a future in Humble Creek. Isaac stretched out and fell asleep in the potting

shed.

Isaac didn't dream of the war, instead, he had a different nightmare. He dreamed of outlaws mocking him as the failure he was as he ran from Humble Creek. Abigail was in his dream and she was left behind in tears, forced to remain behind with the scoundrels. A new town only brought new nightmares – there was nowhere Isaac could escape and find peace.

All Isaac wanted was a peaceful life away from danger. He was foolish to think such a place existed. One thing was sure, he wouldn't find that kind of life in Humble Creek, California. He decided that leaving was his best option.

Moving back east where he had grown up and owning a general store wasn't a bad idea. He could find a small town where no one knew him and start over. He could deal with a lot of things, but outlaws were more cunning than he could handle.

Back east Isaac might find himself a war widow who would understand what he had been through. He didn't need to drag a beautiful woman like Abigail into his unpleasantness. He found a lantern and lit it, going back upstairs and pulling out his Bible to read. He knew he would get no more sleep that night.

The next morning, Isaac walked back through the kitchen and up to the bedroom to retrieve his bag. He shoved his belongings inside and counted out some coins that he planned to use to buy some food at the general store in town.

There sure wasn't anything to eat at Magnolia Hill farm. Isaac was so hungry that he imagined the smell of fresh strawberries.

With his bag over his shoulder, Isaac walked out of the doorless front entrance. He nearly tripped over a crate containing fresh strawberries, biscuits, and honey. His mouth started to water, and Isaac dropped to the ground, looking at the food as if it was a pot of gold. He glanced around, knowing Abigail Anders had something to do with it.

He took a bite of the biscuit as he spotted her. The sun had yet to fully rise and Isaac saw Abigail with a paintbrush in her hand. She was humming a tune and had a satisfied look on her face. Abigail stood back and admired the newly painted farm sign. Then she noticed him and waved cheerfully.

Isaac walked towards Abigail still chewing. When he had swallowed, he spoke.

“You make a fine biscuit. I was about to eat the furniture if I didn’t get some food.” Isaac paused. “The only problem is that there isn’t any furniture in my house.” Isaac laughed, which felt good after a night filled with dark thoughts.

“I hope you found a bed,” Abigail said.

“Nah, slept on the floor. But I’d prefer that than sleeping in a bed filled with goodness knows what.” He eyed the paintbrush. “What are you doing up so early with a paintbrush in hand?”

“I love the early mornings. I feel like I am alone in the world; just me and the birds. I knew we had leftover paint from making our farm sign and thought I would put it to good use. This way, anyone who passes by will know someone new has come to town. It’s the first of many improvements on the way for Magnolia Hill Farm.”

“You were up early to paint my sign and still managed the time to

make biscuits. I'm impressed," Isaac said as he popped the last strawberry in his mouth.

"I make breakfast for my family every morning, so it was no different from other days. I'm curious, Isaac, did you make your decision about Magnolia Hill Farm?" Abigail asked.

"Well, if I can be honest..."

Abigail interrupted. "Oh, please do be honest. I detest liars."

Isaac was momentarily taken aback because he hadn't exactly been honest about his past. But it was more of an omission than a lie. He would deal with that later.

He didn't want to tell her about his past but he wondered how long he would be able to keep his past a secret if they were going to be friends. "I thought I had decided to head east and forget all about Humble Creek and Magnolia Hill Farm, but now I'm unsure. Seeing the sign repaired and painted gives me a slight glimmer of hope."

"When I saw your bag packed, I was sure you were a goner." Abigail straightened her straw hat and her sunny yellow dress. It wasn't the same drab frock she wore the day before. If it was possible, Abigail Anders looked even more beautiful than the day before.

"As you so astutely observed yesterday, I'm not the quitting kind. I feel like you laid down a challenge for me and I don't shy away from a challenge. The chances are pretty good that I'll leave but I'll give it a shot first."

Abigail smiled.

"I was reading the Almanac on the train and while it's too late to plant crops, I can still create a modest garden. Since I have little money, I'll have to grow food quickly. Is there a river for fishing around here. Catching fish and snaring critters will keep food in my belly," Isaac said.

He felt his affection for the farm and for Abigail Anders growing. He wasn't going to let her know of his growing feelings because she would think him silly. He hardly knew Abigail and she certainly didn't know him.

"There's everything you need here in Humble Creek. Before you're able to stock food in your pantry, I'll be happy to bring you some of ours each day." Abigail smiled.

"You can't give away food meant for your family, Abigail. I saw a big man riding around your property and he looks like he eats a lot. Was that your Pa? You had best ask him about feeding a stranger," Isaac said. It was hard to believe Abigail came out of nowhere and she was skilled, fearless, generous, optimistic and beautiful. Isaac had to pinch himself to realize she was real because her list of good qualities was endless.

"That was my Uncle John, whom you'll meet at some point, although best I tell him about you first."

"If you say, Abigail. I'm willing to accept some help but everything you give me I'll give back. I will not accept charity from you or anyone else," Isaac said.

Abigail rode away to Hopewell Farm with the promise to return the next day. Isaac was not easily convinced to do anything that he didn't want to do. With Abigail it was easy and he hadn't known her long.

By showing Isaac that there was an answer to his problems she convinced him to stay. He was overwhelmed by the work ahead of him and decided that he'd start by planting the few seeds left in the potting shed. As a gesture of hope.

Chapter 6

Before returning to Hopewell Farm, Abigail rode Nutmeg

hard down the winding path and back again. She let out a loud whoop of elation.

Isaac Curry was staying in Humble Creek; after enduring loss, she finally gained hope for the future. There were still many things to bring her down like the absence of her father or the condition of her brother Thomas. One person couldn't solve all of Abigail's problems but at least Isaac was a start.

Abigail slowly walked Nutmeg to the barn. She could feel her horse's relief as she removed her saddle. Her Pa had given Nutmeg to Abigail as a birthday present when the horse was a filly with spindly legs. Abigail's favorite spice was nutmeg, so the name seemed appropriate.

Her father knew that a girl riding alone through the hills and valleys of Central California needed to ride well. The horse wasn't just a means of getting someplace but also to get away from danger. Abigail needed to ride fast and skillfully to stay safe.

From the day the all grey filly nuzzled her nose beneath Abigail's chin, they were best friends. Abigail grabbed a bruised apple from the barrel that was always kept full and fed it to Nutmeg. It was

her favorite treat.

Abigail walked into the house with the intention of checking on her brother Thomas. It was always her hope that he'd be better than the day before, but it hadn't happened – yet. Abigail slowed as she approached Thomas' bedroom when she heard voices. Uncle John was in the room and Abigail lingered in the hallway to listen to what was said.

“You’ve been keeping up with your morning chores, Thomas, but it’s not enough. You come back after your work and collapse into this bed. I don’t see any unhealed wounds, so I’m forced to think you’re just lazy,” Uncle John said.

Abigail could hear Thomas adjusting himself in the bed. The last thing he needed to be called was lazy. She wanted to burst into the room but wanted to hear Uncle John speak his mind first.

“Come harvest time, I need help getting the corn and wheat out of the fields. I have cattle that need tending and some need to be sold at market. Your Pa used to lead a small cattle drive but now I got no one to do that.”

“I hear ya Uncle John. The war left me battered in so many ways and I’m working to get better. It takes time and patience,” Thomas said in a faint voice.

Uncle John snickered. “Your father up and run off with all my patience and time. We’re going to lose this farm if you don’t get out of that bed and start earning your keep.”

“Don’t you think my father will come back?” Thomas asked.

“Nope. You’re starting to sound like your sister, Abigail.” Uncle

John said in disgust.

Abigail couldn't take it any longer. Thomas needed her protection and Uncle John couldn't say bad things about her father. "Uncle John. Thomas is trying to regain his strength and talking to him that way isn't helping. Hopewell Farm has run up against hard times before and we've survived."

"Abigail, I'm telling Thomas how it is. It's not like me to dance around the truth. This farm is in trouble and it's going to take us all working hard, to save it. Your Pa isn't coming back, and you forget that I know him better than all of you. If he does show up someday, he'll be useless... like his son."

Abigail threw her hands over her ears and sobbed as she ran from the room. Thomas tried to call her back, but she ran to her room and slammed shut the door.

Uncle John banged on her door. "Abigail, I love you like a daughter and didn't mean to upset you. You're strong and I thought I could tell you the truth. Your pa ain't never coming back."

Abigail replied. "I'm tired and I'm going to bed. I know you mean well, Uncle John but you're wrong."

Abigail heard Uncle John lumber down the stairs. She was too mad at what she heard to have a conversation. She'd end up screaming and Uncle John would too; it would hardly be a constructive chat.

When Abigail's father had returned with Thomas, he was destroyed. He made Thomas look like he'd been off for a ride in the country. He was skin and bones and had little interest in eating anything.

Before the war, Ezra Anders would consume Abigail's apple pie in one sitting. He was a bottomless pit. She made him the dish when he arrived home and he did little more than glance at it. Ezra slept from dusk to dawn and Abigail's mother was sick with fear.

Perhaps it was watching his family suffer that made him feel guilty, but Ezra Anders seemed to improve. He started to eat and gain some of his weight back. Ma and Uncle John were thrilled that Abigail's father was back, but Thomas thought his actions were suspicious. There was no way to easily rid oneself of the nightmares brought on by war.

Abigail started to watch her father closely and often she found him in a rage. He'd be in the barn kicking holes in the wall, which he blamed on horses gone wild. He wasn't better at all; it was a charade to make his family, that he loved so deeply, feel better. Then one night he left for town and told Abigail he'd return. He never did. Abigail knew a man with half a mind couldn't survive in the rough land of the west. If he did survive the wild terrain, the outlaws would do away with him.

Despite the facts, Abigail believed deep in her heart that she'd see her father again. Now, however, she believed that might be in heaven.

Abigail laid stiff on her bed as the smell of beef stew wafted from the kitchen. Her belly rumbled but she was still too mad to face Uncle John. One thing was sure, if there was food cooking, Uncle John would be there. He didn't fight in the war but stayed behind as the last man in the Anders family.

Uncle John only knew of the unpleasantness in a place like Virginia through stories. He never had his friends on the battlefield die in his arms. Uncle John had never been shot at or faced death.

Thomas said every time he heard a loud noise, he felt like death was near. There was no escaping it. Hearing Uncle John complain must have cut Thomas like a knife. Thomas had earned the right to complain and Uncle John had not.

Abigail tried sleeping on her back, her belly and either side but nothing was working. She heard her mother deliver dinner to Thomas in his room, which she did despite Uncle John's objections.

He thought Thomas should at least make it down to dinner. Ma argued that her son wasn't going to get better if he didn't eat three hearty meals a day. Abigail thought the coast would be clear to go unnoticed into Thomas' room.

"Did you eat your dinner?" Abigail asked as she opened Thomas's door.

"You sound like Ma." Thomas chuckled. "I'm surprised she doesn't hold me down and shovel food into my mouth."

"Don't give her any ideas. Ma has good intentions, but you know her as someone who worries about everything. Her worst worry came true when Pa left and now she thinks the worst will always happen," Abigail said.

"I inherited that way of thinking from her and you got your optimism from Pa. Of course, the war took that away from him. You didn't come to visit this morning after you finished my chores. I was worried you were injured or found a beau to run off with. I wouldn't blame you if you did flee from this place."

"Magnolia Hill Farm has a new owner who came all the way from Boston. I was busy convincing him to stay. The place is in a

horrible state of decay and he was going to head back east." Abigail opened his window because with the sundown the light wouldn't bother Thomas. During the day he insisted on having the shutters pulled.

"Let me guess, you convinced him to stay," Thomas smiled.

"Yes. His name is Isaac Cully. And he's going to give it a go. You know I can be convincing, and I don't give up on anyone," Abigail said.

"Is Isaac an older man or an ugly man?" Thomas asked.

"He is neither, Thomas. I've said enough about that for now," Abigail said repressing a smile.

Abigail gave Thomas scant details about Isaac. Her brother knew her so well that he'd see that she was smitten if she said too much.

"I'm glad you have someone to talk to, besides me. I'm not talkative or much use as a friend at all."

"Thomas, you're my brother and I love you dearly. I know you're going through something that I'll never understand. What more can I do?" Abigail asked sincerely. There was nothing she wouldn't do for Thomas.

"I'm glad you asked, Abigail. I don't know how much longer we can carry on our charade. You've been doing my chores for months without Uncle John figuring us out. It's only a matter of time before he catches us in the act. I've decided it's time for me to go out and give the work a try."

Abigail was surprised. She didn't want Thomas to fail and suffer a

setback. She figured he could slowly build his strength and soon be able to take back his chores.

It would leave more time to help at Magnolia Hill Farm, which wasn't nearly as important as helping Thomas heal – of course. “I think it's a grand idea. I'll come for you before dawn and we can go to the field together. I've worked out a system that makes quick work of the chores. Over time, you'll develop your own way of doing things and it will be even better. You have farming in your blood, Thomas and I'm sure you'll do great.”

Thomas was looking forward to proving his mind was healthy again. His eyes sparkled and that gave Abigail hope that the old Thomas was coming back.

Thomas was out of breath when he and Abigail got to the barn. Abigail took him the long way through the meadow because she'd forgotten he wasn't used to the longer distance.

Abigail encouraged her brother every step of the way and pointed out the blooming forsythia that surrounded the barn. They were hearty plants that came back year after year. If the barn burned to the ground and all the other plants died, they'd still manage to peek through the scorched earth.

Abigail reached for a bucket that fell to the ground and made a loud noise. Thomas reacted by dropping to the ground, wrapping himself in a ball and covering his head. Abigail had seen the behavior before, so she remained calm, and approached Thomas slowly.

Abigail didn't touch him because sharp tools were within reach

and she didn't want to be mistaken for an enemy. He had told her to stay away when this happened because his visions were so real that he might imagine that she was someone trying to hurt him. He might attack her.

She could see Uncle John approaching the barn from the open doors. His timing couldn't be worse, and Abigail started to panic when good luck intervened. Leo was a farmhand who had stayed on even when things were so bad that the Anders couldn't afford to pay him.

He must have been aware of Thomas' unfortunate reaction. Abigail saw Leo explain something to Uncle John and point in the opposite direction. Leo was gesturing wildly to make his point. Uncle John turned his horse and quickly rode away. Leo walked back towards the barn.

"John is going to check out the damage to the fence line that happened after that last storm." Leo said, his face concerned. "Is Thomas going to be alright?"

Leo was a stooped-over man with gnarled fingers, but he was clever as a fox. He was never in the war but had been fighting outlaws for most of his life. He was a survivor and a good friend.

"Your Uncle John's a good man but he doesn't understand what Thomas is going through," he said, putting his clawed hand on Abigail's shoulder.

"Thomas and I appreciate you, Leo. You're a good friend to this family," Abigail said.

"You've treated me as such so I'm happy to be here for you. You and Thomas are good people – your Pa would be very proud, if he

were here..." Leo's voice trailed off and he gave Abigail one more encouraging smile before he went back to the barn.

Abigail sat with Thomas as he recovered from his episode. Then they took care of the barn animals and tended to the garden together and when they returned to the house, Uncle John was waiting.

"Good morning, Uncle John," Thomas said. He had dirt under his fingernails as proof that he'd been hard at work.

Uncle John nodded his head. "You took more time than usual today. Did you have difficulty?"

Abigail answered the question for her brother. "Thomas was waylaid by me, Uncle John. You know I can get to talking – I slowed him down. I had to talk about every flower and bird that I noticed."

Uncle John grumbled and went into the kitchen to see what Jane was cooking up for breakfast. Uncle John had his faults but deep down he wasn't a bad person.

He sacrificed a lot to hold together the Anders family after Abigail's father left. It was one of Abigail's traits; she could see the good through the bad. She decided to test Uncle John's generosity while he had a full stomach.

She told him that the farmer who recently bought Magnolia Hill Farm was trying to make the most of the growing season and planned a limited planting. Abigail had noticed leftover seeds in the barn.

She asked if she could share and he obliged. She didn't give Uncle

John a lot of details because she didn't want him to know she was spending a lot of time there. Abigail planned to fill her family in later when Isaac was convinced to make Humble Creek his full-time home.

Chapter 7

The main house on Magnolia Hill Farm was larger than Isaac's home in Boston. It was broken down but he started to see promise in the structure under the light of the day. Isaac bought a bed in town. He found an old quilt that looked as if it had sentimental value to the previous owners.

It was carefully stitched, and Isaac found it folded on a shelf in the closet. The outlaws who looted the place missed it for sure. Isaac found a chest of drawers that had drawers and hung curtains in the bedroom that previously laid in shambles on the floor. He must have done something right because, for the first time since Isaac could remember, he had a good night of sleep.

Isaac had a clean shirt to change into which was the only extra he had. He hated to admit that he cared how he looked for Abigail – but it was true.

She wore a sunny yellow dress the day before, which Isaac hoped was for him. He was just returning the kindness. It was silly to think a woman so kind, strong-willed and beautiful would feel anything for him – a broken man.

Abigail said dreams couldn't come true until you had them in the first place, though. Still, he wasn't good enough for a woman like

Abigail. Isaac sighed, that was all that Abigail was – a dream.

Isaac heard footsteps in the parlor, so he picked up his gun and stood at the top of the stairs. “Is that you Abigail?”

“No, sir but Abigail Anders sent me here. I didn’t know I should bring a rifle.”

“Who are you and why did Abigail send you?” Isaac asked.

"I'm Leo and she had me bring seeds that we have leftover from planting at Hopewell Farm. She cleared it with her Uncle John and said you needed them first thing," he said. "If I were you, I'd get to planting because the season's getting on."

Isaac walked down the stairs to find an old man smiling with two bags full of seeds.

“These are from Abigail? She’s full of surprises, isn’t she.”

“That she is. The most generous, kind and strong woman in the county if not beyond. I’ve known her for years,” Leo dropped the bags on the floor. “You got tools for digging?”

“I do. The gardening shed was overlooked when the outlaws came through Magnolia Hill Farm. They left everything I’ll need to get started. Do you think trying to make a go of this place is crazy?” Isaac asked.

“The farm was productive once and it can be again. Good luck Isaac and I’ll be seeing you,” Leo said and disappeared through the doorway.

The sun beat down on the field as Isaac worked hard, digging rows for his seeds. An early morning so hot meant the rest of the day would be unbearable. It would be a whole lot easier if he had a mule, but he should be happy with what he did have.

The only thing getting him through the back-breaking work was images of Abigail with her dancing green eyes. Isaac stopped to wipe the sweat off his forehead and he knew he was mixed up in the head; an image of Abigail formed before him. She was wearing a straw hat and she was with a man.

After rubbing his eyes and drinking water, Isaac realized he wasn't seeing things. Abigail Anders was indeed across the way at Hopewell Farm with a man who was probably the brother she mentioned. Isaac had nothing to lose so he decided to be a friendly neighbor. Abigail saw Isaac approaching and the corners of her mouth turned up.

"It's a beautiful day and I've already got a good start on my planting. Can I lend a hand?" Isaac offered.

"That's very neighborly of you, Isaac. First, let me introduce you to my brother Thomas," Abigail said as she looked at her brother.

Isaac offered his hand and Thomas raised his shovel. He was poised to bring it down on Isaac's head. "Get back," Thomas shouted.

Abigail showed her strength when she grabbed her brother's arm and saved Isaac from probable mortal injury. She guided Thomas gently back towards the house. "Isaac, give me a minute to get my brother safe and calm. I'll be back, if you don't mind waiting."

"I'll be here Abigail. Do you need my help?"

“No. I’m familiar with Thomas and it’s best I take care of this on my own.”

Abigail disappeared in the house and Isaac leaned against the shovel that Thomas was ready to use as a bayonet. Isaac knew the look in Thomas' eyes. It was the same one that he saw each time he looked in the mirror.

It was a look of fear, confusion, anger, and desperation; the kind a man had after spending time on the battlefield. There was no doubt Thomas had been to war, not unlike himself. It was a burden not only Thomas carried but Abigail too.

As his loved one, she was fighting her own war – to bring her cherished brother back. Isaac’s secret that he fought in the war; was more important than ever to keep silent. He didn't want Abigail to worry about him as she did for her brother. Isaac lifted his leather hat, ran his finger through his curls and regained his composure before Abigail came back.

“So, that was my brother Thomas. I wish you had met him when he was at his best. He’s having a very difficult time because of what he endured during the war. Those of us who weren’t involved in the unpleasantness will never know the horrors. He tells stories of what transpired and I’m not sure I believe him. The horror seems too great.” Abigail picked up the shovel and put it on her shoulder as if the weight was nothing.

“You can only count your blessings and be glad you didn’t have to go through that. Are you the only one with the patience to help Thomas through his troubles? What about your Ma or Uncle John?” Isaac asked. He was uneasy even talking about the war.

"My Uncle didn't go to war since he was needed here, so he has no

idea how it changes a man. My mother is a worrier and she has enough to be concerned with since my Pa left. Anyone who comes back from war is not a normal man." Abigail repaired the poles on which the beans climbed while Isaac pulled weeds.

Isaac cleared his throat because although she didn't realize it, Abigail had just called Isaac abnormal. He didn't take it personally, though, because she was right. "You're beyond kind Abigail. I hope that someday Thomas recovers and can work alongside you. How does he manage his chores when you're not around?" Isaac asked.

Abigail sighed. "Thomas spends most of the day in bed, except for the times that I accompany him out in the fields. If what just happened occurred while Uncle John was around, there would have been trouble. I do what I can to protect Thomas from Uncle John but it's impossible to know what will send him into an episode."

"I imagine strangers, loud noises and quick movements have to be kept away," Isaac said.

"Exactly, how'd you know?" Abigail asked with a quizzical look on her face.

Isaac could kick himself for getting too close to the truth. He needed a quick recovery. "I'm from Boston, remember. I had cousins who came back from the war changed men." That was certainly true. "Abigail, you deserve a life of your own and you can't sacrifice everything for Thomas. I'm sure that deep down he doesn't want that."

"You're right Isaac, Thomas wants to get better and today he tried. I have been doing his chores each morning and he feels guilty about that. I'm trying to ease Thomas's pain and let him know that

he doesn't have to run away like my Pa," Abigail said. She stopped working for a moment and looked sad, which was not like Abigail.

"Tell me more about your father and why he left," Isaac said.

"I can't, Isaac. My day has already been poor and it's not midday yet."

"Emotions can make one more tired than physical labor. Be sure to take time today to smell your favorite flower or read a book," Isaac said. He sensed it was time to return to Magnolia Hill Farm. Abigail needed time to complete her morning chores, which Isaac guessed, kept going when she went inside the house.

The rooster crowed and Abigail laid down her gardening tools. "I have to go help Ma with breakfast. I'll be sure to save you some muffins and blueberries."

"You're too kind, Abigail. I don't know what I've done to deserve a friend like you."

"You'd do the same if you found me alone and lost on a street in Boston," Abigail said as she wiped her muddy hands on her apron.

"See you soon, Abigail," Isaac said as he tipped his hat and walked back to Magnolia Hill Farm.

Red-tail hawks were circling above looking for a breakfast snack. They were looking in the right place because Isaac spotted plenty of vermin in the long grass at his farm. Isaac looked back and watched Abigail as she disappeared from view.

She was a remarkable woman in every way. She cared for her brother and Hopewell Farm in general. If not for Abigail's kindness

and grit, many lives would fall apart. That included him because he would be without hope if it weren't for her.

Isaac considered himself a worthless broken man and therefore, had no business associating with a woman like Abigail Anders. She already had enough on her hands with her brother Thomas and her stern Uncle John.

He couldn't drag a beautiful angel down and he knew he would. He wanted her in his life because she made him happy, which was selfish. As soon as she got a peek into his past – Abigail would pity Isaac. That was the last thing he wanted and one of the reasons he sought a new beginning away from Boston.

Isaac sensed, though, that the connection between them was already made, and the spark ignited. There might be no way to stop what was happening between them.

When Isaac woke in the bed that was still strange to him, it was visions of Abigail that comforted him. When he came upon a stubborn root in the ground, it was Abigail's positive attitude that encouraged him to continue. Isaac loved the Central California sunsets and it was Abigail that he wanted to share them with.

Chapter 8

Abigail joined Thomas, Uncle John, and her Ma for breakfast. Thomas was getting used to eating his meals alone, but he thought Uncle John was getting suspicious about Abigail doing his chores. He tried so there wouldn't be so much pressure on Abigail.

"These hoe cakes are tasty, Abigail. I like to see us using up last year's surplus of cornmeal. I doubt we'll have a bumper crop this year. We couldn't afford enough hands to get more planted," Uncle John said as he heaped butter and blueberry syrup on his cakes.

"Thank you for the compliment, Uncle John. Is there any good news we can discuss to start the day off right?" Abigail asked. It seemed like bad news was all Uncle John had to share. Abigail liked to start the day on a positive note – if possible.

Uncle John was silent while he tried coming up with anything but bad news. "This is bad news that you might get some good out of," he finally said.

"I'll try," Abigail said. "First tell me the bad news and next tell me how I'll benefit." If nothing else, Abigail was amused by Uncle John. Profiting off another's misfortune didn't seem very Christian.

“Vern and Mary Keller are leaving Friendship Bend because outlaws have taken over their town. They tried staying put but decided to move before one of em took a bullet from the outlaws. They have children and grandchildren elsewhere, so they’re going there,” Uncle John said.

“How in heaven’s name can I benefit from such unfortunate news?” Abigail asked.

“They’re selling off all their animals. I don’t think the cost will be much because they want to get rid of everything, so it’s not left for the outlaws. I know your friend at Magnolia Hill Farm needs a horse at least.”

"His name is Isaac Curry and he definitely does need a horse. Nice of you to think of him, Uncle John." Abigail couldn't wait to deliver the news to Isaac. He really needed a horse of his own. "I'll head over to Magnolia right after breakfast. Thomas, I'll come to visit later."

Thomas looked at Abigail and smiled. He wanted her to know that he'd be fine for the day without her.

Abigail rode past the Magnolia Hill Farm sign on Nutmeg with another horse following behind on a lead. Bettie was a horse used by Leo and the other hands as needed. Isaac was securing the front door to the hinges. He was beginning to take pride in his house, and it showed. The front door was repaired and a proper front porch welcomed visitors.

“Hello, I bet you’re wondering why I’ve got two horses,” Abigail said wearing her green farm dress with a pretty cream-colored

pinafore. Her straw hat was held by a leather strap so it wouldn't slip while she was riding.

"I'm curious. As you can see, Abigail, I've got a year's worth of work to do and only months until harvest. Thanks to you, I have helping hands; you sure got the town of Humble Creek to change their way of thinking about me. Now, tell me about the extra horse you're pulling."

"I'm bringing you to Friendship Bend which is the next town over. I think you'll gladly sacrifice a day's work if it means getting a new horse," Abigail said.

"I don't have too much money left and your giving has to stop with the gift of a horse. It's too much but I figure I can afford one after my crops come in," Isaac said.

"Trust me, Isaac. I'm going to bring you to Keller's Farm, and I think you'll come away with a horse and a few coins left in your pocket. Have I told you something yet, that hasn't come true?" Abigail asked.

He thought about that.

"I have to admit that. You do seem to have an uncanny knack of predicting good things for me."

"That's right," she said, with a grin. "Now, let's get going."

A ride along the creek with Isaac would be heavenly. She wanted to get him a horse but spending time with her handsome friend was nice too.

Abigail and Isaac were on the well-traveled path by mid-day,

riding in a leisurely fashion as they chatted. It wasn't easy for Abigail to pay attention to the conversation because what she really wanted to do was race.

The route they were traveling to Friendship Bend was straight and flat. Abigail knew the area well because it was where her father taught her to ride fast.

"How far out are we Abigail?" Isaac asked.

"Two miles, maybe a bit more."

"Is Bettie a fast horse?" Isaac asked, his hazel eyes glowing.

"Don't know, why don't you give her a try," Abigail said as she let out a giggle and took off.

It was a challenge as Isaac tapped his heels to Bettie's sides and they took off after Abigail. Abigail had the advantage of having ridden the path before, so she was aware of the dips and swells.

Abigail was teasing Isaac as she let him reach her before she'd take off again, leaving him in her dust. They finally settle into a side-by-side fast gallop. Isaac's black curls bounced and fell in his eyes.

The wind made Abigail feel alive as it rushed through her hair and she half expected Nutmeg to make a giant leap and begin flying like a bird. As they slowed their horses, Isaac gave her an admiring glance.

"You, woman, will stick at nothing," Isaac told her. "I don't think there's anything you can't do. You're amazing."

"I think the same about you, Isaac Curry. There is a problem,

however,” Abigail said as she pursed her lips.

“Oh.”

“You’re not fast enough!” Abigail and Nutmeg took off again laughing and waited for Isaac at the Keller Farm.

“That was fun. Let’s go see about getting me a horse that can keep up with you and Nutmeg.” Isaac walked Bettie to a water trough that was close to the farm entrance.

Abigail had so much responsibility, what with Thomas’ issues and keeping Hopewell Farm up and running, that when Isaac turned up it was a nice distraction.

It didn’t take long for Abigail to realize Isaac was so much more. He made everything better and her dreams possible. The farm really could stay safe from outlaws and Thomas could recover. She was silly to think that the only reason he should stay was for Humble Creek. Abigail cared most that he stayed for her. She had to ask herself – was she crazy to fall for a shop owner from Boston.

Abigail joined Isaac at the trough after telling Vern that they were interested in purchasing a horse or two. “I do believe you’re still trying to catch your breath Isaac,” Abigail teased.

"I'm not too proud to admit that I was just bested by a woman," Isaac said. "I'll admit that if I had to be beat by a woman – I'd choose you every time."

“Good, because I’m sure to beat you each time we ride. You city folk can’t come to Humble Creek and expect to ride faster than a farm girl. I rode a horse before I could walk.” Abigail laughed. She could spend the day flirting with Isaac – which was definitely what

they were doing. Their eyes told the story.

Vern Keller walked down from the main house. "Howdy, you must be Isaac Curry," Vern said as he offered his hand. It was attached to a muscular arm and a blocky body; impressive for a man with white hair and creases on his face. "I've got a few beauties and I'm sure you're going to like my price. I'm practically giving stuff away, so I leave nothing behind for the outlaws who have driven my entire family out of Friendship Bend. My father was one of the first settlers to this sweet town." Vern cleared his throat, frowning at the ground. "Well, it used to be a sweet town."

"If you don't mind me asking, how'd they succeed in driving you out?" Isaac asked.

"My livelihood is cattle mainly. One by one my bulls ended up dead. They killed them off and soon I had a bunch of cows with no way for them to have babies. Eventually, I couldn't afford it but thanks to a loan, I switched to pigs and had me a couple of prized stallions too. A fire broke out in my main barn and I knew they set it. The chicken coop was spared if you're interested in hens and a few roosters. The remaining horses were in the corral out back, which are the ones I have for you to take a gander at."

"Did you try stopping the scoundrels?"

"I did," he affirmed. "And I lasted longer than most in Friendship Bend, but eventually, they won. The Kato and Yana Indian Tribes were victims of the outlaws too, so they helped protect my land as long as they could. They proved no match for the gangs of outlaws that were forming. One gang in particular really knows how to fight – it's like they had been involved in the war. They learned their skills somewhere," Vern said. He led them to the corral where a chestnut horse caught Isaac's eyes.

Vern didn't want much at all for the horses, so Isaac purchased three. One would be his horse to ride every day and the others had been trained as a team, which he could hitch to his wagon. Isaac had found a broken down wagon a few days ago covered with weeds in a neglected corner of the farm.

One of the men from town that was helping him, fixed it up perfectly. Abigail asked the folks of Humble Creek to help Isaac and they did. She had a persuasive way about asking, and everyone knew that if they were in a jam, Abigail would help. Mrs. Landell at the general store said that Abigail Anders would give a stranger the shirt off her back – after she mended it.

“Where you off to, Vern?” Abigail asked.

“I’m going to a little town in Missouri called Curiosity Bluff. My son lives there and we’re going to build a house on his land.” Mary Keller came out and Vern swung his arm over her shoulder.

“There comes a time in one’s life when this is all that matters.” He kissed Mary on the cheek.

Seeing the happy couple warmed Abigail’s heart. She shared a glance with Isaac, and it seemed he felt it too. At least, she thought so, which may have been wishful thinking. Vern promised to stop by and say farewell to Uncle John as they had become friends through the years. He’d drop off the chickens that he had left at Magnolia Hill Farm.

“One more thing I’ll have is a whole lot of citrus. I’m not leaving anything behind. You interested in oranges, Isaac?” Vern asked.

Isaac's eyes lit up. "Yes, sir."

Abigail knew orange trees were something Isaac was promised by the previous owners of Magnolia Hill Farm. Abigail nudged him. “I knew your dreams would come true.”

Isaac smiled.

It was slow going back to Humble Creek. Isaac rode his new horse, which he hadn’t named yet and had two on leads. Abigail had Bettie trailing behind her. They took a different trail home and wandered through the town of Friendship Bend, which was a sad sight.

The general store was still open, but it was run down and low on supplies. The church and schoolhouse were boarded up, and the only thriving business seemed to be the saloon. Abigail told Isaac how Friendship Bend was like Humble creek not that long ago and she was determined that it wouldn’t crumble too.

“I don’t want that either, Abigail, but right now we have something more important to consider,” Isaac said.

“What could be more important than saving Humble Creek?”

“Naming my horse. I’ve been going through all sorts of names in my head and nothing seems right,” Isaac said.

“Hmm. The white diamond on his nose – *Diamond*.”

“Nah,” Isaac said.

“Harvest,” Abigail suggested.

“No.”

“I have the perfect name,” Abigail shouted. “Name your horse *Dandelion*. The first thing to grow on your land.”

Isaac laughed. “I’ve often thought of that weed. Dandelion it is, and I’ll call him Dandy for short.”

Abigail was proud that she came up with the perfect name. It was the perfect end to a perfect day.

Chapter 9

Isaac woke early to get a count of his chickens so he could estimate the number of eggs he'd produce. Counting chickens was not easy work because the birds didn't line up to be counted.

It was as if they knew Isaac was coming and passed around the word. They were especially active and made Isaac realize he had to build a bigger coop.

"I'm going to have chicken dinner every night of the week if you girls don't start minding. You're rarely out strutting around like you are today – what gives?" Isaac was talking to the animals.

Isaac heard Abigail's melodic voice behind him. "I hope you aren't waiting for your hens to answer back." She laughed.

Isaac took off his leather gloves and tossed them on the ground. "Something smells good in your basket," Isaac said. He followed Abigail to a spot beneath a willow tree. "I'm hungry as long as it isn't chicken." He laughed.

"No, it's ham hocks, cornbread, and applesauce. I hope you don't mind company because I expect Uncle John to be following me any moment," Abigail said. From the look on her face, Isaac could tell that the visit wasn't her idea.

John came riding up on his brown and white horse that Isaac had seen riding by Magnolia Hill Farm on several occasions. Uncle John called out. "Howdy, got some vittles for me in that basket, Abigail?"

"If Isaac doesn't mind sharing. I thought you already ate, Uncle John," Abigail said with a grin.

"I did but it was an hour ago and a man like me needs to keep up his strength," John said as he hopped off his horse. He was dense but not fat. His booming voice made him look taller and wider than he actually was.

Isaac knew John had no interest in food, he had come over to meet the man who'd been occupying Abigail's time. Isaac had a feeling, no matter what he did or said, John would be suspicious. Isaac stood up from where they had been sitting the ground ready to start the picnic and firmly shook John's hand. "Good to make your acquaintance John. Abigail has told me so much about you and how you single-handedly saved the Anders Farm. It's always nice to know your neighbors. I was going to visit Hopewell Farm to introduce myself, but you beat me to it."

"I had no choice but to save the farm because the other men in the family are broken. A man who's broke is about as useful as a dull knife," John said.

"I agree," Isaac said. He planned to agree with everything Uncle John said. He didn't want his large neighbor as an enemy. He thought he left all those behind back east and he didn't want Abigail's Uncle John to be his first one out west.

Isaac viewed John as Abigail's father figure and therefore wanted to impress the man. The farm was better than it was only a couple

of months ago so at least John couldn't accuse him of being lazy. He braced himself to be interrogated as if he were a Union soldier captured by the Confederates.

“Abigail tells me you’ve come all the way from Boston. Why’d you end up here?” John asked.

“Well, sir. Owning a store in a city like Boston doesn’t offer a lot of peace and quiet. I was looking for that kind of life and learned about a town called Humble Creek. It was far away from the madness.” Isaac thought he might come off as a weakling for seeking a peaceful life but anything was better than opening up about his past as a soldier.

“I imagine this is more work than you bargained for,” John said as he grabbed a piece of ham and shoved it in his mouth, chewing loudly.

“When I arrived in Humble Creek at Magnolia Hill Farm – I was taken back at first. It was nothing like I was promised but with the help and encouragement of Abigail, I learned to love it here. I wake up every day excited to see what waits for me.” Isaac said. John didn’t seem convinced that Isaac was right for his niece.

“Abigail, darling; I’m parched and I left my canteen in the barn at Hopewell. Would you ride over and fetch it for me?” John asked.

“No need. Isaac has a working pump,” Abigail said.

“I really need it and this way Isaac and I can continue our conversation,” John insisted. Abigail took the hint and rode off.

John laughed with a sarcastic tone. "Isaac, you're in the west now and there ain't no such thing as peaceful life on a farm. What?

Have you been reading fairy tales? You wake up at dawn and close your eyes when the stars come out. You have outlaws and conmen coming at you from every direction. It takes a man to live out here."

"I'm not afraid of hard work, John," Isaac said, hoping in his heart that Abigail would come back soon.

John cast his eyes suspiciously on Isaac. "I need to see proof of that. Abigail was let down by her Pa when he ran away and her brother is useless. Except for me, Abigail's been let down by weak men and I can't allow that to happen again."

"I won't let Abigail down, but I'm not asking to court her. Not yet." Isaac said.

"I'm a lot of things, Isaac, but I ain't stupid. I've seen the glances you share with Abigail. I won't stand in your way, but you better prove yourself to be a strong man before I give my approval for you to court her. Abigail needs to be cared for right – she deserves it."

Before Isaac could open his mouth and respond, Abigail came charging towards the willow tree with John's canteen in hand. Isaac had been very happy the first time Abigail charged towards him on a horse. This time, though, was a close second.

"The two of you didn't come to blows. That's a relief," Abigail said. "Uncle John, Ma is asking for us both back at the house. It's not an emergency but she has extra chores for us to complete before sundown."

"We'd better get at it. When the matriarch calls, we answer." John climbed on his horse then looked down at Isaac. "Don't forget

about our talk and what's expected of you."

"I'll remember every word," Isaac said with a smile as if it were no problem at all.

Abigail mounted Nutmeg and as John rode ahead; she twisted around and gave Isaac a smile and a nod. It was confirmation that everything would be alright.

Isaac knew at that moment that at least some of the intense feelings he had for Abigail were reciprocated. A rush of longing rained down on Isaac and his heart had never felt so full.

"Looks like someone just made your day," Abner Fargo said. He was helping out in Isaac's garden. Abner did a little of everything in town and lived in a shed down by the river. He was as harmless as they came. "I see John Anders and Miss Abigail riding away after a visit. I'm guessing it wasn't John who put that grin on your face." Abner smiled. He was a little man with only a few teeth.

Isaac chuckled. "Anyone ever tell you, you're a wise man, Abner?"

"Not too often, Isaac, but I know the look of love when I see it."

"I wouldn't say love but it's something like it," Isaac said. He'd have to turn it over in his mind a bit because love was a pretty strong word. Isaac had never loved a woman before.

"Good luck whatever it is. Beans are in the basket on your back step," Abner said as he wandered down the winding road.

Isaac went into the potting shed and began separating the beans into piles for canning. As he was sorting out bruised vegetables, his full heart sprung a leak. Sorrow overcame him when Isaac recalled

what John said. He warned him that Abigail needed a strong man and Isaac knew it was true.

He also knew that he wasn't strong – the war left him weak and broken. He was a lot like Thomas in that way, but he covered it better than Abigail's brother did. If Isaac had an episode in the presence of Abigail she would be scared and angry.

She would look at him as the people on the train did after he'd called out in his sleep. After the initial shock, Abigail would pity him which was the last thing he wanted.

Isaac was exhausted after tending his flock all morning. He went from having no chickens to more than he could house in a short amount of time. A rest up in his bedroom would help Isaac make it through the rest of the day.

His bedroom was his refuge because no one could see him if he did have a nightmare; it was a place he could scream as loud as he wanted without anyone hearing. In his bedroom he could hide his weakness, meaning he would never share a bedroom with a wife, certainly not Abigail.

Isaac was lying flat on the swampy ground with a musket by his side. He felt alone but there were tens of soldiers around him. Every minute or two they crawled forward while laying on their bellies; slow and quiet so the Confederate Army wasn't aware of their presence. The smell of death was always close because Isaac was surely crawling over the spot someone drew their last breath.

A muddy black boot nudged beside Isaac's chin, causing his body to jerk. He looked up to see the tip of the bayonet and the devilish

face of the confederate soldier.

Isaac woke up from his nap in a cold sweat. He tore off his clothes while sleeping and moved from the bed to the floor. It was the same dream Isaac had a hundred times before and it always ended the same way – looking death in the face.

Isaac sat up and put his head between his knees, convinced he was a shattered man who would forever remain that way. He was not good enough for Abigail Anders. And he never would be.

Chapter 10

Abigail was in the kitchen putting biscuits and fresh jam in a basket to bring to Isaac. She had done her chores and completed her project in the barn, so Abigail had the day free.

Isaac was expecting her so they could ride into town fetch supplies for his house, which was more like a home every day. Abigail was humming a tune as she did most mornings.

"Another beautiful day, Ma. I'm bringing the day-old biscuits to Isaac because otherwise, they'd go to the pigs," Abigail said to her ma who came into the kitchen after clearing the breakfast table.

"I can't believe after all these years, I still don't have the batch-size figured out. I hate making too many biscuits," Ma said.

"Isaac doesn't mind you making extra," Abigail said with a giggle.

"He's not family. I don't mind sharing but it shouldn't be a regular occurrence."

"Oh, Ma. When we give from the heart, it always comes back to us. Reverend said that in his sermon last month.

Her ma didn't reply because she probably knew Abigail was right.

Abigail had to only mention the sermon and she grew quiet because she felt guilty. Abigail's ma had strayed from the Church when her husband Ezra left despite protests from Abigail.

"Are you planning to be with Isaac Curry most of the day?" Jane asked.

"Yes, Ma. Is that a problem?"

"No, as long as your chores are done and old Mrs. Dorset is there as a chaperone." Isaac had enough money now to hire a woman from town to come clean for him.

"Yes, Ma. She'll be there. She's always there." She was a nosy woman and never left them alone for a second if they were in the house. That's why her mother didn't worry. She knew Mrs. Dorset would keep a closer eye on them than anyone else ever would. "Plus we're going to town for supplies. Don't worry."

"One of these days, Isaac should be invited over to share a meal. It seems like the neighborly thing to do," her ma suggested.

"That's a good idea, Ma," Abigail said, giving her mother a peck on the cheek and leaving.

Abigail took Nutmeg over to Magnolia Hill Farm with butterflies in her stomach. She now expected the feeling every time she rode towards Isaac's farm.

Abigail pushed open the front door because she didn't bother knocking anymore. Isaac came walking down the stair looking handsome as always. His hair hadn't been crunched down by his hat yet and it bounced when he walked. She could hear Mrs. Dorset call out a greeting to her from the kitchen and she returned

it.

“What do we have here?” Isaac asked, referring to the basket on Abigail’s arm. “You spoil me, Abigail.”

"On top of the biscuits, you'll find something I made for you. I had an old blue dress and figured out a way not to waste the fabric."

Isaac found a blue scarf to tie around his neck and three blue handkerchiefs to keep in his pocket. “A perfect gift and something I’ll use every day.” Isaac tied the scarf around his neck. “I’ll think of your kindness when I wear it.”

“Are we taking the wagon into Humble Creek?” Abigail asked.

“No need. I’ll put saddlebags on Dandy, which should be room enough to carry my supplies. Are you ready to race?”

“Yes, indeed,” Abigail responded with a mischievous grin.

“Dandy and I have had time to get to know one another and you don’t stand a chance, Abigail.”

“We’ll see.” Abigail pulled her bonnet tight.

Isaac and Abigail raced and were neck and neck along the path to Humble Creek. Unlike the straight road they had raced on before, this one was twisty. Abigail pulled ahead and Nutmeg was spooked by a fallen tree hidden around a turn. Abigail was thrown to the firm ground and let out a blood-curdling scream.

Abigail landed on her back and her eyes were blinded by the sun before Isaac's face appeared inches from her. She gasped and so did he. He gently lifted Abigail to a seated position and brushed the

dust from her cheek. She was calmed by his touch and reassuring voice.

Abigail inhaled Isaac's sweet breath and those butterflies in her stomach were in a frenzy. She didn't know if she was hurt in the fall because she was preoccupied with the feeling of being in Isaac's arms.

"Are you hurt, Abigail?" Isaac asked, never diverting his eyes from the gaze they shared. "Can you speak? Tell me you're not hurt." Isaac repeated himself.

"I'm okay Isaac," Abigail finally responded. Time stood still as it was clear neither one of them wanted to pull from their embrace. For the first time, Abigail knew for sure that Isaac shared her feelings.

Nutmeg ran into the meadow at first but eventually joined Dandy. The horses waited as if they knew that the accident and Isaac's reaction meant that something more was happening between Isaac and Abigail. They weren't just two pals with a common interest.

"Isaac," Abigail whispered.

"Yes,"

Abigail chuckled. "We can get back on our horses and continue into town, although, honestly, I could sit here all day. I've never felt so safe."

Isaac blushed, stood up and whistled for the horses. "I was thinking the same thing, Abigail. He helped her to her feet and they both brushed themselves off before walking their horses into town. They had enough racing for the day.

“Is Humble Creek always this quiet?” Isaac asked. “I haven’t been here often, but it seems unusually still.”

“It’s odd because I’d think at least there would be folks gathered at the post office. There must be a...” Abigail stopped when a blaze of gunfire came from the direction of the saloon. Abigail instinctively put her hand on her gun.

Madness ensued as folks spilled out of the saloon and began to run in every direction. Gunmen were diving for cover and screams could be heard over the gunshots. Abigail had been in this situation at least once before and she was able to keep a cool head. Her father taught her to run away from gunfire so she tugged at Nutmeg; Abigail assumed Isaac would follow.

Abigail’s bonnet flew off as she whipped her head around to see Dandy buck up and throw Isaac to the ground. She screamed out. “Isaac get back on your horse. Get up – what are you doing, you’re nothing but a target.” Abigail noticed the terrified look on Isaac’s face. He was frozen in the middle of Main Street with bullets raining down; they were coming from every direction. She slid off her horse.

Abigail was strong so she dragged Isaac out of the street and behind cover. Her hands pressed against Isaac’s chest, Abigail noticed his heart was racing and his breathing was erratic. Isaac tried to push Abigail away as she was trying to help him. His eyes were so dilated that they looked black with fear and rage. The complete opposite of what they were less than an hour ago.

Abigail realized she and Isaac were not the target of the shootout. It was a drunken argument between two gangs – they likely forgot what it was about after the first bullet flew. The gunfire slowed and then stopped.

Isaac finally came back to himself. He walked to the horse trough and splashed the murky water on his face. He must have wanted to snap himself out of whatever state he was in. As Abigail processed what just happened, Mrs. Landell came out from the general store.

“Abigail, are you alright? How did you get caught in this mess?” Mrs. Landell asked.

“Bad luck I guess. Came into town with Isaac Curry to pick up supplies for his farm. I think we’ll come another day for that because today seems to be a day full of mishaps,” Abigail said as she kept one eye on Isaac at the trough.

“Does Isaac know he’s dunking his head in some nasty water. Horses have been dipping their snouts in there all day long,” Mrs. Landell remarked.

“I think the cleanliness of the water is the last thing on Isaac’s mind. How did you know to close the door to the general store? No one was gathered at the post office – it’s like you knew there’d be trouble.”

“When you see the comings and goings of the outlaws, you get to know their habits,” Mrs. Landell said. “I noted scoundrels from opposing gangs go into the saloon. I told the postmaster who told a couple of customers and word spread. When gangs mingle and drink, it means gunfire will follow, so we locked everything down.”

“I’m glad no one was hurt. See you soon,” Abigail said.

Abigail fed Nutmeg a carrot while she let Isaac compose himself. She had some thinking to do herself because she was familiar with the way Isaac acted during the shootout. It was the way Thomas and her Pa looked when they came back from the war. It was the

way her brother looked when he raised a shovel to Isaac and when he reacted to a loud noise in the barn.

She thought about the general answers he had given about his life in Boston and how he'd made no mention of the war. Someone his age from Boston would have either fought on the battlefield or been deeply affected by the unpleasantness.

Isaac's reaction when gunfire rang out told Abigail everything she needed to know. She couldn't believe it had taken so long for her to glean the truth. The biggest question Abigail had – why hadn't Isaac told her the truth? Abigail wiped away a tear; she didn't know if she was angry or sad and walked to Isaac.

“All's clear, Isaac. I've been away from Hopewell a long time and there's work to be done, so let's head out,” Abigail said with little emotion. “Today's not a good day for you to get supplies”

Isaac rubbed his eyes and when he took away his hands, the black eyes were gone. His hazel eyes showed no fear or agony. Isaac Curry had returned to reality. He was ready to pretend that nothing happened as if Abigail was dumb as a rock. She refused to establish eye contact and they rode home in relative silence.

“Good night, Isaac. Be sure to work hard for the next few days because I think we're due for one of those late summer thunderstorms,” Abigail said as she went her way and Isaac went his. All she could manage was a comment on the weather.

“Good night,” he said, in a shaky voice. He wouldn't meet her eyes and Abigail knew she was right about him being in the war and the fact that he hadn't told her had been on purpose. It made her sad.

Abigail hoped she could tiptoe into the house with no one noticing.

The last thing she wanted was a conversation about how her day with Isaac went. She sneaked past the parlor where Uncle John was smoking his pipe and her ma was mending clothes. Abigail breathed a sigh of relief as she crept up the stairs past Thomas' bedroom.

"Abigail, is that you?" Thomas called out in a hushed tone.

The squeaky floorboard gave her away. "It's me, Thomas. I'll come to see you in the morning. It's been a long day and I'm going to fall asleep before I hit the pillow."

"I need to talk to you for a minute, please," Thomas asked.

Abigail's brother went out of his way not to be a bother because he knew Abigail already did so much for him. She opened his door and walked through. "What can I do for you, Thomas?"

"Nothing; I wanted to share the news that I've gone two nights without horrible dreams and for once, I didn't wake in a pool of sweat," Thomas said with a rare smile.

Abigail reached down to embrace Thomas. "That's wonderful Thomas. What brought on the change?" Abigail asked.

"You told me time would heal me if I had patience. It was that and seeing you so happy since Isaac came to Humble Creek. It rubbed off on me I guess."

"I hope it extends to three nights and beyond. I'm so proud of you for admitting you needed help and letting me in. You're inspirational, Thomas." Abigail was hesitant to tell her brother about Isaac's past because the timing wasn't right.

“I know my troubles aren’t over, but I feel like I have a chance of being normal again someday.”

“I never doubted it, Thomas. I’ll keep doing the morning chores until you’re ready. When I took you out last week, it was too soon,” Abigail said.

As Abigail lay in bed, she stared up at the ceiling. The more she thought about everything, the more furious she felt about Isaac keeping this secret from her.

He should have known Abigail, if anyone, would understand. She felt like they had grown close in recent weeks and now all of that was destroyed. Trust was ruined and without trust, there was nothing.

Chapter 11

Isaac woke up in a puddle of sweat, the likes of which he hadn't seen since arriving in Humble Creek. Meeting Abigail and busying himself on the farm, kept Isaac's mind occupied.

War and death weren't on his mind much and he thought the worst was over. He started to envision a future and having Abigail Anders as a big part of it.

Her hair looked like spun gold and her eyes the color of a spring meadow. She was beautiful and didn't seem to know it. She scrunched her nose when she had a decision to make and Abigail's eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

Finally, Isaac could close his eyes and see Abigail instead of his friends being killed in front of him. But on this warm summer morning, Isaac had to come to terms with the fact that he might have lost Abigail for good.

The thing with "episodes", was that Isaac didn't remember them perfectly. He knew what happened, but the details weren't clear. Isaac saw the sparks of gunfire before he heard the sound. He and Abigail were slowly making their way through town.

For a second, he thought he was seeing things, as if in a dream.

Then he was thrown to the ground by Dandy and the sounds were unbearable.

Isaac was unable to move, and Abigail was on Nutmeg looking down at him as she encouraged him to move; to get out of the cross-fire. Isaac just lay in the dirt and Abigail saved him, putting herself in grave danger. She could have been shot dead because of him.

John told Isaac that Abigail couldn't be with a weak man, and now he knew exactly why. Isaac was putting the woman he might have feelings for, in mortal danger. Isaac would be better off sitting alone in a dark room, like Thomas. At least then, he couldn't be a danger to those he loved. But he couldn't do that because he had to work on the farm.

Isaac hung his bedding so it would dry by bedtime. It was then that Isaac had a detail of what happened during the shootout flash before his eyes. He pushed away Abigail, but he couldn't remember if he had hurt her.

He could see the look of disappointment in her eyes as she realized Isaac had been in the war. It was the look of being betrayed and the memory cut through Isaac like a knife. Isaac collapsed back on his damp mattress in a daze. The only thing Isaac could think to do was work. Physical labor might help him get through the pain.

Isaac looked out his window of wavy glass and saw men arriving to help on his farm. Despite everything, he had Magnolia Hill Farm and that would have to be enough.

Isaac walked down his front steps to find Vern Keller. He must

have stopped by to say farewell to his friend John Anders across the way at Hopewell farm. A massive bull stood next to him and his wife Mary stood behind him with a couple of cows.

"Hello, Vern. I hope you haven't come back to reclaim your horse. I've grown fond of Dandelion and he hasn't failed me yet," Isaac said.

Vern laughed. He looked relaxed and was likely looking forward to leaving Friendship Bend behind. "No Isaac, I'm not here to take your horse. As I said, I intend to get rid of everything that the outlaws might find useful. We've just left. We couldn't sell the farm to an unsuspecting farmer, knowing they'd be tormented by the outlaws. I sold just about everything but this bull that I managed to hold on to. I thought you might find it useful," Vern said.

"That's a kindness I'll remember for as long as I remain in Humble Creek. You can't know what this kind of gesture means to a poor farmer just starting out," Isaac said.

"I can know, Isaac. I was a poor farmer many years ago and I couldn't have gotten by without the kindness of townsfolk. They didn't want me to fail and I had a pretty good run. I raised a family in Friendship Bend and now it's time to leave. I'm too old to fight the outlaws and criminals. You, however, are not."

"Thank you, Vern. I'm going to try my hardest to make my community safe, again," Isaac said as he took hold of the bull's lead.

"Is Abigail here?" Vern asked.

"Not today," Isaac answered.

“Too bad. Tell her I said farewell. Do you know my secret to succeeding in Friendship Bend?” Vern asked

“What’s that, Vern?”

Vern looked back at Mary and smiled. “I had a good woman at my side from beginning to end. Without my Mary, nothing would be possible.”

Isaac took the animals and wished the Kellers good luck in their travels. Isaac took Vern’s advice to heart, but he wasn’t sure the good woman he wanted in his life would talk to him again.

Isaac walked through the neat rows of corn that were shoulder high. The late start Isaac had planting was not going to negatively affect his harvest. He had plenty of doubters, but he barreled through and thanks to Abigail – didn’t get discouraged.

He already had plenty of hands, who were working for free, lined up for harvest. Maybe it was beginner’s luck or perhaps it was his brothers looking down on him from heaven – regardless, Isaac was proud.

A full flock of chickens provided security. With so many of them, Isaac wouldn’t starve. The bull he received from Vern was priceless and Isaac looked forward to growing his herd.

“Mr. Isaac,” Abner walked in from the wheat field.

“We’re friends, Abner, so you don’t have to call me anything but Isaac.”

“I appreciate that. You’ve been good to me, allowing me to take an occasional carrot from your garden,” Abner said shyly.

“Take a dozen. You earned it and I’m still getting the hang of canning. I don’t want them to go bad. Something you need, Abner?” Isaac asked. “Are the bugs keeping away from the wheat crop?”

“No, I wanted to tell you about those seeds you found in the potting shed and scattered. They’ve sprouted up and they’ve turned into magnolia saplings. I was going to thin them out some. Looks like you’re going to have a grove. When they grow some, you can transplant them to the front.”

Isaac couldn't help but grin and hug Abner. "That does it. I was meant to be here at Magnolia Hill Farm; there's no doubt about it – I was waiting for a sure sign. My day started out poorly but a lot of good has happened since then," Isaac said. His excitement, however, was short-lived because he didn't have Abigail by his side to celebrate.

Isaac felt safe on his farm. It was something he worked hard to create and now he was beaming with pride as it flourished. Isaac knew if he stayed at the end of the twisty road and avoided the town, he'd avoid chaos.

He knew it wasn't possible because he would have to make it to town eventually; picking up supplies would have to happen. He didn't travel all the way to Humble Creek to be a hermit.

He decided after the war, to live the life that he was lucky to still have. It wouldn't be easy, but Isaac vowed to find a way in honor of his deceased brothers who perished on the battlefield.

Isaac was replacing rotted boards on his horse when John Anders

made an unexpected visit. "Hello, Isaac, it looks like you're hard at work. This place is beginning to look like a real working farm."

Isaac put down his hammer and hopped down from the ladder. "That's the idea. What brings you this way, John. Is everything okay with the Anders family?"

"No." John laughed. "Thomas is useless; Abigail is overworked, and Jane is busy worrying about us all. Not sure if you'd call that okay but that's the way it is. I was coming over to ask you to join us at Honeywell for our annual Independence Day Celebration. We get loud and that bothers Thomas, but you'll be fine. Jane and Abigail fix up a feast and we roast a pig. The hands are welcome to have a plate if they want. Interested?"

There was so much to consider with John's invitation and Isaac was suspicious. It would present an opportunity to get things back on track with Abigail. That alone would make an interrogation from John worth it. Loud – probably not a great idea but Isaac would take a chance.

"Sure, John. I'd be delighted to join the family and celebrate our independence."

"Great. I'll see you in a couple of days. I'll be sure to tell Abigail to set a place for you."

Isaac wondered how that would go over. Not well, he guessed but John made the rules at Hopewell Farm. He worked hard the next few days to continue improving Magnolia Hill Farm so he could be proud to tell people about it if anyone asked.

At the Independence Day celebration, dinner was served on long tables between the barn and the house. The tables surrounded a pit where the pig was being turned. It smelled so good, Isaac's mouth watered.

The farmhands had their table and Isaac joined Jane, Thomas, and John at the family table. Isaac was seated next to Thomas and across from Jane, which was probably Abigail's doing so she didn't have to look at Isaac.

John took the first cut off the pig and gave the rest of the job to one of the hands. They dug in immediately and silently ate before Jane broke the silence.

"Isaac, I was looking at your blue scarf and trying to remember why it looks so familiar. I bet you got that from Abigail because it's the color of the old dress she cut up. Am I right?"

Isaac leaned forward to smile in Abigail's direction. She refused to make eye contact. "That's right, Mrs. – I mean Jane." Isaac had been previously been told to dispense with formalities.

"So," Jane continued. "What brought you out west, Isaac? Abigail has been vague when I've asked her."

Isaac realized there was no way to avoid the truth at this point. If he lied, Abigail would call him out immediately in front of her family. He'd be thrown out of the celebration. Isaac cleared his throat. "I'm from Boston, as you all know, and I owned a shop with my brothers. What most of you don't know is that I served in the war for the Union Army. If you're wondering why I didn't say something sooner – I didn't want to talk about it. I just wanted to be a farmer in Humble Creek and not have people look at me with pity for everything I've been through."

Thomas grabbed Isaac's arm, but he had a calm look in his eyes; a look of understanding and gratitude. "Isaac, I don't know where to begin," Thomas started speaking but Abigail cut him off.

She pounded her fist on the table to get everyone's attention. It worked. "What were you thinking lying to us for months. You ran from your old life and that means you're a coward. I look at you, Isaac, and all I see is a selfish man."

Jane and John looked shocked – they didn't know what to think of this outburst.

"Abigail, I can explain myself," Isaac said. "I didn't mean any harm."

Abigail stood from the table as Isaac was speaking. She ran through the meadow and behind the barn and Isaac started to follow her, but he was pulled back by Thomas. "I've known my sister longer than you. Give her a bit to gather herself and cool off. She didn't really mean that, Isaac. And she's not talking about you."

Isaac frowned.

"Who then?"

"Our father." Thomas gave Isaac a sad smile. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you're here because, for the first time in a very long time, I'm not alone."

"We'll talk but first I have to work things out with your sister. Are you going to be okay for the rest of the night?" Isaac asked.

"I think so, Isaac. I'm going to be okay." Thomas smiled.

Jane looked worried and confused when Isaac excused himself from the table. John was still processing what happened; Isaac got out of there before he figured out that Isaac was weak like Thomas.

Isaac took a deep breath and thought of ways he could have handled things differently. If he had been honest from the start would Abigail have treated him the same way and he would never have got to know her at all?

Isaac would never know and now he was desperate to find the golden-haired beauty.

Chapter 12

Abigail walked for at least an hour with the moonlight and stars as her guide. She ended up back on the front steps of her home on Honeywell Farm.

She recalled the last time her heart hurt as badly. It was the morning her Pa fled Humble Creek. They had plans to go fishing along the creek that afternoon. It was one of their favorite things to do on a hot summer day after chores had been done. It was going to be just the two of them, Abigail and her Pa.

They didn't have to talk because they knew what the other was thinking – at least Abigail thought she did. That day, when Ezra Anders left, her heart broke into a million pieces.

Abigail promised herself that it would never happen again and that she would protect her heart from breaking. With Isaac Curry, Abigail had let her guard down and she had been lied to.

There was a good chance Isaac had inflicted the same pain on his family that her father had on her. He must have had parents whose lives were ruined when their son left.

Isaac survived the war and made it home just to leave again of his own will. There was a hole in their hearts that would never heal.

Abigail thought of the look on her ma's face when Thomas was called to serve. If he up and left now, she would lose her will to live.

Abigail's mind began to imagine all the worst scenarios. Isaac had withheld the truth about his service in the war. What else hadn't he told her?

There was the possibility that Isaac had a wife or sweetheart. Isaac had drawn her in only to break her heart into a million pieces. Abigail was picturing a future with Isaac – to think he might belong to another woman.

A woman who was still missing him and thinking of his deep hazel eyes. Maybe she had run her fingers through his black curly locks and kissed his perfect lips. The thought of it made Abigail physically ill. Those butterflies that were dancing in her belly flew away.

Abigail wondered if Isaac left behind children who felt the same heartbreak she endured when Ezra Anders left. A child who would never feel the encouraging embrace of a father again.

Leaving a child was the cruelest thing a parent could do because it left a wound that would never heal. Abigail would forever blame herself for her father's absence. She wasn't enough to make her father stay. What if there was a child in Boston suffering from the same kind of wound.

Abigail heard a rustling in the bushes and the crunching of foliage under a person's foot. Abigail knew the difference between a two and four-legged sound of footsteps. "Who's there. I've got a gun and I'm itching to use it. My mood isn't good and if you come any farther I'll take it out on you. On a count of five, I start shooting if

you don't show your face. One, Two, Three..."

Isaac emerged from the darkness with his blue scarf around his neck and his hands in the air. "Abigail it's me. I've been looking for you for hours. I was just about to give up and go home. I wouldn't be able to sleep. You accused me of things that aren't true. Please, hear me out," Isaac said.

Abigail put her gun back. With a nod of her head, she told Isaac to sit. She'd hear him out. "I'll listen to you because I'm a reasonable person, but I can't guarantee that I'll believe a word you say. I think of Thomas who has a bushel full of problems and he doesn't lie.

Uncle John is rough, but he doesn't lie, either. You are one giant disappointment to me – go ahead and tell your lies, if it'll make you feel better," Abigail said. Seeing Isaac, made her madder than ever because he looked so honest. He had used that to play Abigail for a fool.

"I didn't lie, Abigail. Only..."

"Kept a secret," Abigail said. "Same thing."

"I was going to tell you but I was afraid you'd react like this and never let me see you again."

Abigail felt her heart relenting a little. He did have a point.

"Tell me now," she said and he nodded.

"I grew up in Boston and my family owned a tannery. My brother Ladd was a skilled craftsman who could make anything from leather. I had a lot of brothers – five of them. Along with Ladd,

Michael, and Sam, I joined the Union Army. I was the only one who returned," Isaac paused to see if Abigail was following.

"That accounts for three brothers. What became of the other two and your parents?" Abigail asked.

"I only had a mother, Adelaide Curry. She was a proud woman who raised six boys on her own. My father died after a night in the saloon when Frank was only three days old.

I hardly remember the man, but I heard about him from my older brothers. It sounds like I didn't miss out on much. We were a wild bunch and we kept my ma busy. Despite it all, there was a lot of joy in the house.

I looked forward to returning to my small town and devoting the rest of my life to my ma. She had to bury three sons because of the war and it was too much. She was dead by the time I got back. My two youngest brothers, Frank and Lee, were both married by then and they took over running the store.

They encouraged me to leave Boston when the opportunity to buy Magnolia Hill Farm came up, in hopes of getting free of my nightmares. I didn't desert them," Isaac said. He looked at Abigail for her reaction.

"What about a wife and children?" Abigail asked.

"I had none," Isaac replied. "War can't be explained but it lives in my mind just as it does Thomas. I almost lost my life too many times to count. Soldiers died in my arms and shared their last words with me. It made me realize that life is precious and made me want to move on. I was seeking a fresh start here in Humble Creek. I never wanted to hurt you or your family. I didn't tell you

about my past and that was wrong, but I was so afraid of losing the life I was building on Magnolia Hill Farm,” Isaac said. “I was afraid of losing our friendship. If I appeared as a weak man, you would have felt sorry for me. Abigail, I didn’t want to disappoint you when you already have so much to worry about.”

Abigail was having a hard time believing Isaac. She still felt betrayed and once trust was lost, it was difficult to gain back. “It sounds like you’re trying to lay the blame on me. As if I wasn’t strong enough to handle a person with a less than perfect past. You had to know I was going to find out sooner or later or did you think I was that stupid?” Abigail asked.

“I never thought that Abigail. Since arriving in Humble Creek my nightmares and episodes all but stopped. Then there was the incident in town with the gunfire. I was right back on the battlefield being shot at by the enemy. When you touched me, I thought you were a confederate soldier. I can only imagine what you must have thought.”

“I knew when I looked in your eyes, Isaac. They were wild like Thomas’ were when he raised his shovel to you.” Abigail looked deeply into Isaac’s eyes. “I was hurt badly when my father left. I was forced to question my worth and there was a time I gave up on living. It was difficult but I fought my way back and I refuse to go back to that dark place. I can’t trust that you might pull me back there.”

Isaac touched Abigail’s arm and she snapped it back. “Give me a chance. It’s all I ask,” Isaac said.

“I need time, Isaac. You hurt me badly and it will take time to figure out if forgiving you is worth the risk. I don’t care that you were a soldier. It doesn’t matter that you carry battle scars with

you that no one can see. My brother came back different and not for a moment did he turn his back on me. His heart remained true and his loyalty to me was never in question. I'm not sure about you."

"Will I ever see you, Abigail?" Isaac asked. "We'd have to go out of our way not to cross paths at some point. We live so close and we share a common cause. We need each other's help to stand firm against the criminal element in Humble Creek," Isaac said.

"I'll find a way to avoid you if my heart's at stake." Abigail stood up and saw a light in Thomas's room. When Isaac confessed that he'd been in the war, Thomas had a look in his eyes. It was the look of hope – something Abigail longed to see since her brother returned to the farm. Thomas' knowing he was not alone meant a great deal to him. Abigail realized that Isaac could help Thomas. She looked back and saw a tear roll down Isaac's cheek.

Abigail took a deep breath and turned back. Isaac looked surprised and wiped away his tear. "I want one thing from you, Isaac. My brother Thomas needs help and as I look around, I see you as the only person who can help. I think having someone to talk to who understands what he's been through might be what he needs to make a breakthrough. Going over to Magnolia Hill Farm and spending time with you outdoors is a whole lot better than being shuttered in his room. I try to understand my brother but it's hard when I've never spent time on the battlefield," Abigail said. "Don't go using this as a way of getting close to me because that won't work. This is all I need or want from you."

"I understand and I think not only will I help Thomas, but he'll be helping me too." Isaac smiled and walked back to his farm.

Abigail tapped on Thomas' door before pushing it open "I saw your light on and I wanted to tell you what I've arranged."

"Arranged for me?" Thomas asked.

"Yes, I've arranged for you to help out on Isaac Curry's farm. It might help to know that someone else has been through the war and survived. Sometimes talking about a situation helps. I'm horrified by your stories, but Isaac will relate and help you put the unpleasantness behind you," Abigail said. "Is that something you're interested in?"

"Yes, Abigail. I've been praying someone would come along who would understand my problems. I thought Pa was going to be that person, but he left. I hesitate to talk to you about it because you weren't there and you don't deserve to have to carry that burden too."

"We'll talk more tomorrow. I have extra chores tomorrow because I'm sure a mess was left after the celebration. I hope I didn't ruin the fun for Uncle John and Ma," Abigail said.

"No, there was plenty of moonshine to take care of that. Curious, did you work things out with Isaac?" Thomas asked.

"I did not. I put all my trust in that man, and I feel betrayed. He made a fool of me. I won't ever look at Isaac Curry the same way."

"That's too bad because he made you smile, Abigail, and you deserve that. Thank you for thinking of me when you asked Isaac for help. That must have been difficult," Thomas said as he patted Abigail's arm.

It felt good for a change to have Thomas comforting her. She was

getting Thomas back – slowly but surely.

“Anything for you, Thomas.”

Abigail went to her bedroom and couldn't help looking at Isaac's window. She wondered what was on his mind as he laid his head down. Memories of the way they held each other when she was thrown off Nutmeg came flooding back.

She shook her head and then the look in his eyes during the shootout, replaced the happy thoughts. Abigail laid down and sobbed.

Chapter 13

The sound of a yellow warbler woke up Abigail before the sun came up or the rooster crowed. The birds nested in an old tree just below her bedroom window.

Uncle John was going to get rid of the tree because he thought it was dead, but Abigail protested. Soon after the tree was spared from Uncle John's ax, it bloomed. Its flowers just like that of magnolia with a pinkish tint.

Abigail stretched and gulped fresh air. For one beautiful moment, Abigail forgot about the Isaac mess and how her heart was broken once again.

Abigail Anders couldn't let it slow her down where chores were concerned because that would affect Thomas. He had been through enough and shouldn't have to pay just because Isaac Curry had messed up.

She buttoned up her boots and stepped into her drab green dress – drab was a fitting color for how Abigail felt.

As Abigail stepped out the back steps, trying not to wake Uncle John, she lit a lantern. It was dawn and the morning glories hadn't even spread their petals. She touched the tops of poppies as she

skipped through the meadow to the barn.

The barn reminded Abigail of days past because it represented what the family once was. Her father and Thomas built most of the barn and the community of Humble Creek helped raise the walls.

The town and the Anders family were at their strongest then. Optimistic, Abigail had thought that Isaac was the future of a vital and healthy Humble Creek, but now she had her doubts. The board that held the doors closed was not in place, which meant someone was already inside. Abigail was not in the mood to deal with Isaac at this early hour, but she had little choice.

“Isaac, I told you what I want from you and nothing more. Ambushing me in the barn is not helping Thomas.” Abigail turned the corner to find Leo in the horse stall. Her face turned red.

“I’m thinking you mistook me for Isaac. I was checking on Buttercup because when it’s time, she’ll need help birthing. I think she’ll hold for another day or two, though.”

“Yes, well, Isaac and I had a falling out. I’m glad it was not him I found here, and I’m glad I didn’t miss the birth of Buttercup’s foal,” Abigail said.

Leo towed off and pulled up a stump. “My ear’s available if you want to share your thoughts. I see you doing Thomas’ chores every morning and today I’m helping. I might as well listen while I milk.” Leo smiled. His grandfatherly presence was always appreciated.

Abigail pulled eggs from under the hens and replenished their feed. When they heard the sound of the seeds pouring, they came charging. Leo sat patiently milking a cow and waited for Abigail to start talking. “Leo, as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been a single

man. You may not understand.”

"To you I'm a farmhand but I had a life once and I'm a good listener," Leo said.

“Isaac didn’t tell me about his past,” Abigail said. She dropped an egg on the ground. “Lord in heaven, that must mean some sort of bad luck.”

“Or good luck,” Leo smiled. “Think about it this way. If you’d met Isaac and had a past that might make him not want to see you again, would you have told him about it?”

Abigail had to admit to herself that she might not have. Leo had a point.

“I was married once – bet you didn’t know that. No matter what, we always forgave each other. She died of the fever before we even had a chance to have little nippers. I’m glad I was never so mad that I didn’t forgive Marjorie. I’m sure she did more than burn the biscuits, but I don’t remember those things.”

“I never knew you had a wife. Marjorie must have been special,” Abigail said.

“All I know is that she was special to me. Look deep in your heart, Abigail. You’ll figure this out. I’ve got to tend to the smokehouse – you have a good day.” Leo shuffled on to his next chore.

Abigail whistled as she finished up in the barn. She heard the rooster crow. It was time to tend to the garden. It was producing which meant a lot of canning for her and her mother. Abigail was weeding when she heard a sound and snapped around her head.

“Uncle John, I didn’t know you were standing there,” Abigail said nervously.

“Sun’s just up. Your chores start with preparing breakfast, so it looks like you’re doing the chores of your brother, Thomas,” Uncle John said. “Is this something you’ve done before?”

“Um, ah,” Abigail stammered. She wasn’t sure what to say. Uncle John had finally caught her in the act.

“Abigail, don’t lie to me because if you don’t spit it out, I’ll go ask Thomas. He’s a frail coward so I’ll easily shake it out of him. After all, I’ve done for this family... “ He shook his head, angry. “This stops now.”

John started advancing towards the house where Thomas was unaware their carefully crafted plan was falling to pieces.

Abigail jumped to her feet and gathered her dress, racing after Uncle John. “Please don’t go up to Thomas’ room while you’re in this state. He’ll have an episode for sure and mistake you for a Confederate soldier. He’ll try to kill you.”

“I’d like to see him try. Thomas can’t manage his own chores. What makes you think he can overpower me?”

“Please no, Uncle John. The war took my Pa. I’m trying to stop it from taking my brother too. A little kindness, please.” Abigail was running so fast that she tripped over a root, crying out in pain.

Uncle John stopped, turned around and shook his head. “I wish it weren’t this way, Abigail. But anyone living on this farm has to pull their own weight.”

Before John could walk up the front steps, Jane Anders stepped onto the porch and threw her hands on her hips. Abigail rarely saw her ma with such intensity in her eyes. "John Anders, you are shaming the family name. Yelling at your niece as she lay face down in the dirt, is unacceptable behavior. I know you're a brute, but this crosses the line."

"I'm sorry, Jane, but the game Thomas and Abigail have been playing has to stop," John paused. "Were you in on this, Jane?"

"No, and I don't even know what you're talking about. Perhaps you can calm down, John, and give me the details." Jane leaned on the fence post to listen. In the meanwhile, Abigail stood up and brushed herself off.

"Your daughter has been doing Thomas' chores for who knows how long. They've been lying that your lazy son was getting out of bed every day. I'm about to throw him off Hopewell farm. I'll leave Abigail to you," John said as he started to walk again.

Jane put her hand out palm first. "I will work on getting Thomas up and out of bed. I take part of the blame because I was unaware my son needed my help. I won't have to discipline my daughter because she's a grown woman and knows there was a better way to handle this." Jane looked at Abigail. "Isn't that right Abigail?"

Abigail nodded her head. "Yes, Ma but I..."

"That's enough dear. Can this be over for now, John?" Jane asked.

John made a noise that sounded something like a bear and sighed. "I'll give you one week. If he's not out in the field working, then he's out. I'll be watching him like a hawk, and I won't be fooled twice." John pointed at Abigail. "I'd say check with your friend

Isaac and see if he'll take him in but he's war-sick too. It won't be long until he spends his days in bed too. The outlaws will take over Magnolia Hill Farm and don't say I didn't warn you." John walked towards the field that would have to be harvested in a couple of months.

Abigail fell into her ma's arms. "I'm sorry I deceived you, Ma. Please forgive me."

"You're my flesh and blood, Abigail, of course, I forgive you. I was unavailable and blinded by my own grief. Let's get breakfast started and we can figure a way to help Thomas. Regardless of what happened this morning – we can always count on John being hungry for breakfast." Jane smiled.

Abigail was happy her ma realized that Thomas needed her help. If it was only understanding she could give, it would be enough.

Abigail was hurt when her father left, and she realized it was just as bad if not worse for Jane Anders. Abigail cooked up some porridge, which would be followed by eggs with ham gravy on top. John liked biscuits with every meal and Abigail slathered them with orange marmalade.

"Ma, do you really think Uncle John will force Thomas to leave in one week if he doesn't start working?" Abigail asked.

"I think he will. John is a man of his word and I don't think we can rely on that changing – not now and not ever. I can see by the slant of your eyes that you have a plan. Are you going to share?" Jane asked. She made the gravy extra thick; the way Uncle John liked it.

"Yes, I'll share. I spoke with Isaac about helping Thomas because as we now know, he fought for the Union Army also. I imagine they

had similar experiences. Isaac agreed but now I need to convey to him the urgency of the matter."

"You left the Independence Day celebration in a huff. Have you patched things up with Isaac?" Jane asked.

"No, but I'm willing to put my issues aside. My brother's life is at stake."

Abigail decided that she'd visit Isaac in the morning and let him know of Uncle John's threat. Abigail plated up John's meal and Thomas', which she'd deliver to his room. It was best to keep Thomas and Uncle John separated as much as possible. The last thing they needed was an argument. Between Thomas's episodes and Uncle John's temper, it would end badly.

"Breakfast is served," Abigail said as she walked into Thomas' room. "Did you hear me and Uncle John arguing?"

"I could hardly miss it because you were right out front. I heard Ma stand up for me. That was heartening because I was starting to think she forgot I existed," Thomas said with a chuckle. "I know mother loves me but there are times she forgets to show it. I feel terrible for having put you in an impossible situation, Abigail. The war not only affected me and Pa, but the whole family."

"Not to worry, Thomas, we're going to find a way out. I promise you that," Abigail said. "We have seven days to prove to Uncle John that you're on the mend."

Before falling asleep Abigail thought back to what Leo said. He was always willing to forgive his wife Marjorie. He had peace and didn't even remember what they had fought about.

She wondered if Isaac's mistake mattered more than all of the good things that he added to her life. It didn't. She wasn't sure how tomorrow would go or the next, all Abigail knew was that Isaac mattered. She hoped Isaac felt the same.

Chapter 14

Isaac heard the rooster, so he kicked off his blanket. For a split second, he forgot about the unpleasantness at the Independence Day Celebration. Who would have thought telling the truth would cause so much pain; it probably had a lot to do with the lie that came before the truth.

Chores didn't wait until Isaac was in a better mood, though. They had to be done each morning without fail and since he had no family to pitch in, the work fell on his shoulders alone.

Isaac cleaned out the feed trough for the chickens once a week and filled it with grains; the same went for their water. Collecting eggs happened every day and after he had a couple of dozen, he sold them to the general store. Isaac pulled open the gate and rang the bell, which alerted the cows that it was time for eating and milking.

Cleaning out the horse stalls was Isaac's least favorite job. It required loading hay on the wagon and bringing it to the barn. It sat by the fence because he had no room to store it in the barn. The hayloft was in disrepair.

Isaac met Abner as he was walking towards the perimeter of the farm.

"Howdy, Abner. I didn't expect to see you today. Not that I'm unhappy to see ya. I always welcome the company because I can talk to animals all day and they don't answer back." Isaac laughed.

"Animals are funny that way. I was on my way into town and thought I'd see if you need anything on my way back," Abner said.

"You're heaven sent, Abner. I need more nails because I have to start fixing my hayloft. I have eggs that you can sell to Mrs. Landell and I'll give you some money to cover the difference. Keep whatever's left."

"Isaac, you don't need to pay me. When Magnolia Hill Farm starts making money, we can talk pay. As long as I have food in my belly, I have enough," Abner said as he looked at something happening behind Isaac.

"Your eye is wandering. Is something happening behind me that I should know about?" Isaac asked.

"Don't turn but men are walking outside your fence. They look like they're curious about what you have going on here. My guess is they're up to no good," Abner stated.

"I am going to turn around and look those outlaws straight in the eye. They won't scare me off my own farm." Isaac turned slowly and put his hand on his gun as he nodded his head.

The men looked back and nodded their heads in return. The message was received on both sides.

"Can I help you with the hay before I go into town?" Abner asked. His voice was shaky because he was aware of how dangerous those men could be.

Abigail wore her green dress with a fresh apron as she walked up the path to Isaac's house. He was taking a break biting into an apple when she arrived.

She wasn't pointing a gun at his head, so Isaac figured Abigail must be in a good mood. She wasn't carrying a basket as she used to. There would be no fresh muffins or biscuits.

Abigail told Isaac of Uncle John's ultimatum. As she detailed his terms, Isaac shook his head in disgust. She had come to Magnolia Hill Farm after checking in on Thomas.

"Was he motivated by the ultimatum or did he fall deeper into his pit of despair?" Isaac asked.

"Thomas is barely able to move. He must have dreamed something awful last night because he's dripping with sweat. I'm desperate so I came to you," Abigail said.

Isaac had never seen Abigail's eyes so sad. There was no hint of sparkle or optimism. "Would you object to my going to the house with you. I'd like to visit a bit with Thomas."

"No, I'm not objecting, Isaac. My feelings for you are pushed out of the way for anything that can help Thomas. You are my brother's last chance at putting the pieces of his life back together."

"Let me finish up here and I'll be over. Are you sure Uncle John won't throw me off your property?" Isaac asked.

"I hope not, Isaac," Abigail said with a mirthless chuckle. "My mother is aware of the situation and she's on Thomas's side. She'll

distract Uncle John if she has to.”

Abigail walked back home. Isaac kept his eye on her until she disappeared from sight. Even her back made Isaac long for more days like the one when he held Abigail in his arms.

His feelings for Abigail didn't fade after their falling out. He thought that perhaps he could win back Abigail's trust by helping Thomas.

Talking with Thomas would be helpful in many ways; he would continue his recovery by talking to a fellow soldier. Isaac milked the last of his cows before heading to Hopewell Farm.

Isaac ran into Jane on the front porch who was taking a rest from her busy day. The Bible sat in her lap and her eyes were closed. Isaac tried to creep by her, but she stirred. “Isaac, I've been expecting you. My prayers and gratitude are with you as you try to heal my son. He's in a terrible state today and refused to eat or drink,” she said.

“We'll see about changing that, ma'am. There's a chance we can both benefit from our chat. Can I head up?” Isaac asked. “Is John about?”

Jane smiled and nodded. “Go on up. John and Abigail are out in the field. She thought it best that he be occupied.”

“Abigail thinks of everything,” Isaac commented.

Isaac walked up the stairs and walked into Thomas's room as directed by Jane. It was like being in a cave; the air was stale, and

the shutters were pulled shut. Thomas was staring at nothing with a vacant look in his eyes. Isaac knocked as he walked in to gain Thomas's attention but he didn't move.

“Thomas, I’m here to talk to you, soldier to soldier. You probably think I’m here because Abigail asked me to come. Yes, that’s true but only partly. I’ve yearned to talk to someone who can relate to what I’ve been through,” Isaac said.

“I’m your man if you want to talk about battlefield experiences.” Thomas repositioned himself in bed.

“Do me a favor Thomas and get out of that bed. No one is going to respect you if you lay on your back all day. It looks like you’re making no effort to rejoin the living,” Isaac said.

Thomas pulled his skinny body from under the blankets and sat at his desk facing the wall. Isaac popped open the shutters, which Thomas didn’t seem too happy about.

“Is the light necessary?” Thomas asked as he squinted.

“Yes; our goal is to get you out to the field where there’s going to be sun. Tell me how you’re feeling right now, Thomas?”

"Besides uncomfortable, because I'm in this chair, I feel numb. When I look at you or anyone else. It's like I'm looking through a screen and sounds are muffled," Thomas said.

"Until one of them loud noises creep in. Then it reminds you of a cannon or gunfire – doesn't it?" Isaac asked.

“How’d you know the way I feel?” Thomas asked.

“I had the same muffled sounds and felt like I was looking at the world through cheese-cloth. Just the other day I had an episode because outlaws were shooting guns. They weren’t shooting at me, but I thought they were. I remember the other day when you came at me with the shovel. I knew when I saw it in your eyes that you thought I was the enemy.”

“Sorry about that, Isaac.” Thomas chuckled and eased his posture, showing signs that he was relaxing. “How did things get better?”

"I chose to change and to be honest, I met your sister. She made me want to get better so I could enjoy life alongside Abigail or at least someone like her. I started moving and kept moving. Magnolia Hill Farm left me with no time to think about the war. I was so tired after a day of work, the nightmares stopped.”

Thomas looked into Isaac’s eyes. “I’m tired of letting people down.” Tears started gathering in the corners of his eyes. "After everything, I've seen and been subjected to, do you think I'll ever be normal, Isaac?" Thomas dropped his head to the desk and cried.

“I saw it too Thomas. Friends were killed in front of me and I could do nothing to save them. There was blood everywhere and it took months to stop seeing and smelling it. That happened to both of us and we survived. You’re a survivor, Thomas. Say it out loud,” Isaac insisted.

Thomas shook his head and trembled.

Isaac continued. "You're a survivor – say it, Thomas."

It took a minute or two before Thomas muttered the words. “I’m a survivor. I’m a survivor. I’m a survivor.” Each time he uttered the words his voice became louder and words clearer.

“Survivors are strong and now that you know that, you can do anything. Your family wants you to succeed, even your Uncle John but nothing will happen unless you try. I wanted to get better and did to some extent. The war will always be with me, but I’ve learned to deal with it.”

“Can I come to you if I need to talk?” Thomas asked.

“Yes, as long as I can come to you if I need to talk. I’m going to have bad days when I cower in a corner and nights when I sweat but over time, they’ll lessen. I think that by talking about it and knowing I’m not alone – I’ll be okay.” Isaac put his hand on Thomas’ shoulder.

“There was a time I wasn’t weak and pathetic. I was a strapping young man with a sweetheart before I went to war. I know I’ll never be the same but if I can be a little like that, I’ll be happy. Do you think that’s possible?” Thomas asked.

Isaac shook his head. “I don’t think you’ll come back a little – I think you’ll be better than ever before.”

Isaac waited until Thomas was composed before he left. It was an emotional afternoon, but Isaac had hope that both he and Thomas would emerge stronger than before. He made plans with Thomas to start with the next day’s chores in the early morning.

Isaac planned to ask Abner if he could help at Magnolia Hill Farm because he was needed elsewhere. Isaac had been thinking of hiring Abner as his foreman because he trusted the man which counted for a great deal. Isaac was leaving the Anders’ house when Abigail returned on Nutmeg.

“I hesitate to ask – how’d it go?” Abigail asked.

"I'm meeting Thomas on these steps tomorrow to do the morning chores. We'll see but I think it went well. You get to sleep a little more." Isaac smiled and walked away.

"Isaac, thank you and would you mind if I joined you and Thomas tomorrow?" Abigail asked.

"Sure. I think Thomas would like that. No need to thank me, Abigail. I got a lot out of talking to Thomas – I think he's going to be okay. See you in the morning."

Isaac walked home. It seemed that the frozen exterior put up by Abigail was cracking. They wouldn't be able to go on as if nothing happened, but the journey could begin. Abner stopped at the farm on his way back from town with the nails. Isaac offered him the job and he nearly cried. Isaac was beginning to think he had that effect on people.

"One thing before I leave, I saw those men again who were looking suspicious. They were part of a bad gang of outlaws who recently came to Humble Creek. Best we keep an eye on them," Abner said.

"Will do. Thanks for the tip," Isaac said.

Chapter 15

The yellow Warbler started singing and Abigail popped out of bed. She knew that her positive attitude was needed today, and she couldn't worry about Isaac's past. It seemed unimportant when compared to the deadline for Thomas to be well.

Everything happened for a reason and Abigail thought that perhaps she was meant to meet Isaac so he could help Thomas. The toughest chore of the day was going to be getting Thomas out of bed.

Since returning to Humble Creek, he hadn't done much other than sleep. Abigail buttoned up her boots and walked to Thomas's room. She pushed open the door and the room was empty.

Abigail gasped as she ran down the staircase taking two steps at a time. She bolted out the front doors to find Thomas and Isaac leaning on the railing and drinking coffee, waiting for her. Thomas had shaved his nest of a beard and he wore the overalls that she gave him as a welcome home present. Abigail's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"Am I late?" Abigail asked as she tried to catch her breath.

"No problem, Sis. Isaac and I were swapping stories. Stuff you

wouldn't understand unless you were there. Isaac suggested I clean up because if I look good, it'll be easier to feel good. These overalls are hanging off me but I'm hoping to change that. I'm looking to put meat on my bones." Thomas smiled.

"Sounds good, Thomas," Abigail said.

"If I remember correctly, we should head to the barn first and get the cows milked and fed. Next, I have to hit the garden because from my window I can see the weeds taking over. You know better than that, Abigail."

"You seem to have it figured out, Thomas. I'll let you boys do the work and I'll stand by if you need me." Abigail could have been knocked over with a blade of grass. Thomas seemed ready to work and she only hoped he didn't have setbacks during the morning.

The look on Thomas's face as he walked through the meadow to the barn was like that of a child. Abigail savored every smell and hue as she walked while Thomas's world used to be only muted shades and the scent of death.

Now it was apparent that he saw and smelled everything she did. The wild pink roses were everywhere, and Thomas used to consider them weeds because they grew with abandon and with thorns. On this day he took the time to examine their beauty and appreciate their untamed nature.

Isaac encouraged Thomas to walk slowly and take in the beauty that the lush meadow had to offer. Isaac must have known how a man can see something again for the first time.

They talked and laughed as they walked; Abigail felt lucky to witness their budding friendship. It seemed to be what both men

needed. For so long Abigail tried connecting with Thomas and felt like a failure. Now, she realized, it wasn't her fault because Thomas needed someone he could relate to; someone who had been where he'd been.

"I hate to interrupt you boys but I'm usually at the barn by now with a basket filled with eggs. The meadow will be here when you're done with your chores," Abigail said with a smile.

"Pardon me, Abigail. I didn't realize you'd become the foreman of Hopewell Farm," Thomas said with a note of sarcasm in his voice, which Abigail welcomed. It had been a long time since Thomas had felt well enough to sass her.

Thomas and Isaac hurried to the barn and had the chickens taken care of in half the time Abigail ordinarily took. Isaac told a joke and Thomas reacted with laughter. Abigail hadn't seen him laugh since he arrived home – not really laugh.

He had a fake chuckle that he did sometimes to pretend he was happy, but it never fooled his sister. Abigail knew better. Isaac laughed too and Abigail was mesmerized by the camaraderie Thomas and Isaac shared.

"I'll grab you a stool so you can get milking the cows, Thomas," Isaac said he walked over to a crowded bench in the corner of the barn to retrieve the stool. He had to move an old rusted rifle that was propped against the wall.

Abigail and Thomas were talking when Isaac turned with the rifle in his hand. Before Isaac could say anything, he noticed the wild look in Thomas's eyes. He was on the verge of having an episode. Hoes, pitchforks, and shovels were within Thomas's reach and Abigail was standing next to him.

Abigail reached for Thomas's shoulder and he brushed her off. His sister's patience and affection weren't going to work. "Abigail," Isaac said calmly. "Slowly back away and keep going until you're out of the barn."

Abigail thought about protesting but she trusted that Isaac knew what he was doing. She backed out but remained in the doorway so she could see what was going on. Isaac walked to within a few feet of Thomas and took hold of his shoulders.

"Thomas you're in Humble Creek. You survived the war and you're home on Hopewell Farm, building a new life for yourself. It's going to be better than before and you're making progress. This happens – it's okay to remember the war because it's something that really happened but you have to try and put it in the past where it belongs. Things are going to happen to remind you of the past. You will learn to deal with it as time goes by and accept the help of me, Abigail and the rest of your family. We're here for you Thomas. Breathe deep and remember where you are. You're safe."

Abigail was stunned by Isaac's kindness and patience. No one had ever taken the time to explain to Thomas what was happening to him. Abigail saw Thomas's stiff posture relax and his eyes filled with tears. "I remember everything, Isaac, and I'm sorry. Mostly I'm grateful because you made me realize that these episodes will happen and it's okay." Thomas looked around. "Where's Abigail?"

Abigail went running into the barn and fell into her brother's arms. "I'm here Thomas. I'm always here."

"Did I hurt you?" Thomas asked.

"No you didn't, and you wouldn't have." Abigail stood and dried her eyes. "I never cried so much until you arrived, Isaac," Abigail

said jokingly as she patted his shoulder.

Something happened after that casual touch, her butterflies flew back into her belly. Abigail had no idea if Isaac felt the same or if her renewed feelings were something only she felt.

"I'm beginning to think that tears are a good way to get out your emotions. It's better than keeping them bottled up inside. I've tried that and I exploded. We should get to the garden before breakfast," Isaac said, having just invited himself to breakfast, Abigail noticed.

"Perfect idea. I'll go over and pick blueberries while you make sure the garden is getting enough water. Ma planted rhubarb this year and it's taken over the southern portion of the garden. One of you can cut that back. How many strawberry rhubarb pies can one family eat?" Abigail asked.

"A lot," Isaac and Thomas said in unison and laughed.

"I suppose your right. Uncle John loves his pie and it shows." Abigail laughed and after seeing the look in both their eyes, she turned around. Uncle John was on his horse, Morty.

"Nice work, Thomas. I was just at the barn and saw that everything has been done. What are you doing out here, Abigail, besides talking about how much I eat," John smiled.

When they went in, Jane was thrilled to see Thomas at the breakfast table. He was engaged in conversation, which was a change from the way he used to put his head down and shovel food in his mouth.

Abigail made hoecakes with blueberry syrup and butter that she churned the day before. After they cleaned their plates, Abigail

expected Thomas to be exhausted and return to his room. She figured he'd made enough progress for one day.

"Time for you boys to get on with your day because we have house chores to complete," Abigail said. She and Jane had to clean the dishes, start the soup simmering and bread rising. Abigail cleaned the hearth as Jane swept the floor.

"I'm going to enjoy the fresh air on the front porch. I started a carving project a while back and I thought I'd grab it out of the shed – if it's still there. It's about time I use my hands for something useful. They spent too much time holding a bayonet," Thomas said as he wandered outside.

Isaac looked at Abigail who did the same to Jane. They were pleasantly surprised that Thomas was coming back to life. His recovery would take time, but he was taking steps forward. They collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

"My job here is done for the day, although it didn't seem like work. Spending time with Thomas is not only helping him but me too. I'll be back tomorrow and gladly do the same thing again. Uncle John's deadline will easily be met." Isaac looked at Uncle John who was standing nearby.

Abigail liked that Isaac didn't back down from Uncle John. Many people were intimidated by him because of the way he carried himself and his booming voice. "Isaac, I'll walk you back to Magnolia Hill," Abigail said.

"Sounds like a grand idea, Abigail. I can tell you about what's going on at the farm." Isaac walked out and Abigail followed.

They stopped to check in with Thomas who was unresponsive. It

wasn't the result of an episode but because he was completely focused on his woodworking project. Getting out of his head and doing something constructive was a good sign.

One that Abigail had been longing to see for months. As they walked down the path, Abigail gushed about how proud she was of Thomas and how grateful she was to Isaac. She paused to pluck a poppy from the ground and stick it under the green ribbon on her straw hat.

The weather was warm in Central California in the summer months and it smelled like sage and tomato leaves. It was soon going to be tomato canning week when Jane and Abigail devoted all their time to plucking and canning.

“Penny for your thoughts, Isaac,” Abigail said.

Isaac walked with his hat in hand to give his hair a chance to air out. It was covered in sweat from the morning's work. “My thoughts are worth more than that,” Isaac said jokingly with a twinkle in his hazel eyes.

“Seriously, how are things going at the farm?” Abigail asked. Relieved that things were more normal than they were right after the incident in town.

“Wonderful, really. The corn isn't quite as high as yours because I got a late start. The rows are neat, and my hay will be plenty to feed my cattle. I'll have some to bring to market and Magnolia Hill Farm will be making money sooner than I thought. Your help in rounding up folks to lend a hand was invaluable. I made Abner my foreman and he'll hire help as needed.”

“That warms my heart, Isaac. I knew you could do it, and I think

hiring Abner was wise. He may be a slip of a man without two nickels to rub together, but he has character. You see the good in people that others would ignore," Abigail said as they passed by the farm sign that was painted by Abigail.

"This place was an eye-sore before you came to town. It's incredible what you've done here but it doesn't compare what you've managed with Thomas. I prayed every night that my brother would come back to me, and already I've seen him laugh. You can't know how it feels to have Thomas back in my life."

"Unfortunately, no amount of prayers will bring my brothers back to me," Isaac said as he looked skyward.

Abigail felt bad for bringing up a very sensitive matter. "I didn't mean to remind you of the past."

Isaac shook his head. "No, I should remember Ladd, Michael, and Sam. They were great men and there will be a day that I only remember their smiles and spirit. That day will come, I hope."

"Have faith, Isaac," Abigail said. She took the flower from her hat and handed it to him. "A token of my gratitude."

Abigail walked back to Hopewell Farm feeling good about how things were between her and Isaac.

Chapter 16

Isaac started his day in the potting shed; it was the only room that was livable when he arrived at the farm. Small spaces were a comfort to Isaac because being on the field in battle was open and vast – maybe that had something to do with it.

Isaac was a farmer now and he enjoyed trying new seeds and plants. Isaac stretched and ate leftover cold hoecakes from Abigail. As he chomped on the tasty cornmeal concoctions his mind drifted to Abigail.

He couldn't get the vision of her smiling in her straw hat. Helping Thomas work through his war experiences became even more important to Isaac when he saw how it pleased her. She was at her happiest when those around her were content; her unselfish nature was one of her amazing qualities.

He stretched out his aching muscles as the sun rose. Isaac planned to spend the morning surveying his crops. He was tempted to check growth every day, but he didn't and now he was confident there would be a great deal of sprouting.

"Howdy Abner. You're here early," Isaac commented.

"Slept out in the field with the cattle. Clear sky with lots of stars

and a full moon, what more could a man ask for?"

"I think I'll stick with having a roof over my head at night. If you sleep in the barn when you need to, it would be fine by me," Isaac said.

Abner squirmed. "There was another reason I slept in the field. I saw those scoundrels again and they were taking notes. I approached them and they started asking questions about who you were and how long you planned to stay in Humble Creek. They asked one question that I thought was odd. They asked what side you fought for in the war. Neither was the only answer I gave them because you were busy with your shop in Boston. Ain't that right, boss?"

"We'll talk about that someday but thanks for looking out for me. Next time come talk to me before you take matters into your own hands. Those are some dangerous men, Abner." Isaac said as the skinny man walked back towards the cattle.

"My garden is growing wild. I'm not sure what some of the stuff is. I got seeds from a bunch of people and none of it was labeled. Help yourself to anything you want – we have to put some meat on them bones."

"Thank you, Isaac."

The corn was growing but the wheat was barely showing through the ground. Isaac had been walking along the dirt and it seemed as if nothing was planted there. Isaac sat on the dry ground and threw his head in his hands.

Isaac realized he wasn't make enough money to keep Magnolia Hill as a working farm. He saw his cattle in the distance and started

figuring in his head how much he could get if he sold them. Selling cattle to pay for crops was no way to run a farm. He could survive that way for two years tops.

Like a dream, Abigail started to walk towards him with a basket on her arm. She was wearing her yellow dress and a cream-colored bonnet. Isaac stood up and brushed himself off as she approached.

"I brought fresh water from the well and strawberries. We have so many mother can't keep up with them. What in heaven's name are you doing sitting in the dirt? Did you have a tough night at the saloon and drink too much whiskey?" Abigail asked jokingly.

"I'd sooner spend the night in the pig pen. The saloon's only a place for outlaws so I don't think I'd be welcome. I'm a failure as a farmer. The wheat isn't growing in this section of the farm like I thought it would. If you look just over there you can see the corn growing. I was focused on other things and let this get away from me," Isaac said. He really was a broken man and a failure and he had no idea why Abigail still made the effort to visit.

Abigail opened the jar of water she carried over for Isaac to drink. She held her arm out and let the water pour onto the dry dirt. "Well? Have you figured it out?" Abigail asked.

"All I see, Abigail, is water on the ground," Isaac joked.

"Water is the answer, Isaac. These crops just need help getting started. The rains will come in a few weeks but right now we need to irrigate these crops. Corn loves the sun and it isn't as direct over yonder as it is here," Abigail said with a smile.

"Do you realize how smart you are? It could be that I'm dumb." Isaac laughed and Abigail kiddingly jabbed him in the arm. A

warm feeling traveled through his body and Isaac wondered if she felt the same thing. He felt it before but only in the presence of Abigail.

"You're not dumb, Isaac Curry, that I know for sure. But you are a city boy," Abigail led him to the shed where the buckets were kept. The closest pump was next to the shed, so they filled the three buckets; two for Isaac to carry and one for Abigail.

"You know I'd be able to carry two if we had an extra bucket," Abigail said; comparing the number of buckets they each carried.

"No need to tell me, Abigail." Isaac smiled. "I've never doubted your strength or abilities. I learned my lesson when I raced you on horseback.

Working together made a world of difference. Isaac realized that having a partner on the farm was necessary for success. Two people working together not only cut the labor in half, but it also presented new inventive ideas. Isaac would still be crying on the dry ground if Abigail hadn't come along.

After a dozen trips to and from the pump, Isaac suggested they rest and eat strawberries. Abigail had tossed her hat when it got in the way and her golden hair came loose from its braid.

Isaac was captivated by her beauty as she pushed her locks behind her ears. When the sun shined too brightly, she squinted her green eyes and scrunched her freckled nose. Isaac and Abigail sat the soft grass leaning against the willow tree.

"This tree has survived a lot, from the generations of former owners and then the outlaws. It didn't look like much when I arrived but then the leaves came in. On a day like today we need

the shade it offers,” Isaac mused.

“When you have nothing else to do, a bench should be built in this spot,” Abigail said.

“Not sure I’ll ever run out of things to do,” Isaac said. “No one told me being a farmer would be so hard.”

Abigail responded. “Does that mean this isn’t the life for you? Are you planning to leave Humble Creek and seek an easier life elsewhere?”

Isaac hadn’t thought of leaving Humble Creek. It would mean leaving Abigail behind and Isaac was overjoyed to have her by his side again. “No. Leaving is something I haven’t considered. I said it was hard, but I never said I didn’t love it.”

The smile on Abigail’s face when Isaac told her his plans were as bright as the shining sun. They were getting back to where they were before.

Each moment he spent with Abigail convinced him more that she was a one-of-a-kind woman. Isaac felt like the luckiest man in California when he watched as Abigail naturally went back to tending the crops.

“We did good today, Isaac. You know that you’re not too bad at being a farmer and you’re wise to stick with it. Look around you and you’ll realize how far you’ve come,” Abigail said.

Isaac wasn’t able to look at anything but Abigail. She was the driving force behind the success he’d made of Magnolia Hill Farm. He found himself waking up and thinking - how might I please Abigail. He’d do anything not to let her down.

“I have chores at home, but I’ll be back tomorrow if that’s okay?” Abigail asked.

“That’s a silly question because you’re always welcome. My kitchen is coming together but it needs to be tested. I can barely crack an egg, so I thought maybe you’d try it out for me.” Isaac couldn’t imagine any other woman in his kitchen.

"It would be my honor to be the first to try your new stove. I can teach you how to make a loaf of bread, which is easy once you make it a few times. Until you get a wife, you'll have to eat," she said.

Isaac became flustered at the word wife. There was a time that he never imagined a traditional life with a wife and children but owning a farm had changed things.

If Isaac was honest with himself, he’d admit that it was Abigail Anders that changed things. As she walked home to Hopewell Farm, Isaac imagined a future with her, but he pulled himself back from the fantasy.

Isaac was barely making it financially. Earlier in the day, he was considering selling his cattle and he owed money to several different people. It was not possible to support a wife and children if things didn't change drastically.

There was also his past, which might mess up his future. He might have an episode and leave his future family unprotected. He thought of what John said – Abigail needed a strong man. Isaac knew that was true because a woman so precious deserved to be taken care of.

In the distance, Isaac saw Abigail reach down and pluck a flower.

She swayed as she walked, and Isaac was sure she was humming a tune. His feelings were growing by the day and Isaac had to learn to resist his impulses. He couldn't make a mistake where Abigail was concerned.

Abner Fargo walked by and looked at the watered crops. "Smart idea to bring in some water," he remarked.

"Yes it was and I'm not being boastful. The credit goes to Abigail who came up with the idea," Isaac said.

"She's lovely and smart – quite the combination."

"You don't have to tell me," Isaac said. "Are there boards left over from the work you did on the hayloft?"

"Yes, I haven't figured what to do with them yet. Do you need them?" Abner asked.

"I was thinking of building a bench under this tree. Is that something you can do?"

"Sure. I made a bench at the ranch on the other side of Humble Creek," Abner said.

Isaac asked him to build it and keep what he was doing from Abigail. Isaac wanted it to be a surprise.

Chapter 17

Abigail and Thomas were driving the cattle from one side of the farm to the other. The summer grazing land needed a break so it could regrow, and it was a good day for the job.

Thomas was going to ride for the first time since his near miraculous change. They planned to begin by riding to the eastern edge of their property which butted up against the creek. It would be a good spot to stop and water the horses before driving the cattle back.

As they galloped towards the creek, Abigail slowed her pace. She didn't want to race or make Thomas feel inferior for riding slow. The smile on Thomas's face was all Abigail wanted from their day out together and she got it.

"This reminds me of when we were kids, Thomas. It was always a delight to escape Ma and Pa. They were great and all, but nothing like a little freedom when you're young," Abigail said.

"I agree. People always thought we were twins because we were so close in age. There were times I forgot that I was older until you were favored as the baby." Thomas laughed.

"I was never favored," Abigail shot back. "As a boy, you were

considered the future of Hopewell Farm. I was just the girl who they hoped would marry a wealthy man.”

They both laughed. As children, Abigail and Thomas were inseparable. Abigail was thrilled to have her brother back and she had Isaac to thank for that. Abigail admitted that if she had played the part of the frail little girl at times, it was to get a bit of sympathy from her parents.

“I recall the time you broke Ma’s new plate glass window – her first one. We had it delivered from San Francisco and it was only a week old. You were always the one doing the roughhousing and blamed it all on me,” Thomas said.

Abigail could hardly stop laughing. “I was trying out a new sling-shot that you made. It was working fine because the rock went through the window, shattering glass everywhere. I panicked and blamed it on you. They knew that I wasn’t telling the truth and we both were shoveling manure for a week.”

“And we smelled for a week after, no matter how much we washed.”

They both laughed.

“Have you seen Martha Landell at the General Store lately?” Thomas asked. Martha was Thomas’s sweetheart before he left for the war and Abigail had not heard her name since then. She was the child of the owners of the store. She left Humble Creek to work in San Francisco.

"No. I'll inquire next time I'm in town. If she were to come home, would you want to see her? You were courting her before you went to war," Abigail said. She was pleasantly surprised to hear Thomas

mention the sweet woman.

"I'm not certain, Abigail. I don't have much to offer and I can't be trusted with someone who isn't familiar with my background."

"I think Martha would be compassionate about your experience. She may have encountered other men like you. Most people have. Having met Isaac Curry, you know you're not alone."

"I was just asking. It's not like I have the confidence to march into the general store and declare my love for a gal I haven't seen in years. Chances are she's married off to a wealthy landowner up north," Thomas said. "I still have a lot of recovering before I think about courting anyone."

Thomas grew quiet as they approached the creek after passing the cornfields. "Is everything okay, Thomas. We were talking about the good times we had growing up and now you've grown silent. Was it something I said?" Abigail asked. They were approaching the herd and the cattle dogs who had accompanied them started to bark.

"It's the smell coming from the creek and the sight of the cornfields. It reminds me of the battle at Antietam and that brings back the most horrid memories of the war. Things I wouldn't wish on my most bitter Confederate enemy. Men became monsters and there was so much blood, Abigail. There were rivers of blood," Thomas said as he developed a trance-like look in his eyes.

It wasn't wild but sad and the look scared Abigail but not because she felt unsafe. It was Thomas she feared for. She knew Thomas witnessed something unthinkable. She wished Isaac were with them because he had an idea of just how bad it was.

She pulled up on Nutmeg and Thomas did the same with Bettie. “There’s no one out here but the animals and me. You can cry and you can scream. I don’t care because I want to hear it all in as much detail as you can muster. I’ve heard stories from out here in the west about Antietam and until now, I had no idea you were there. The stories you have of that battle are festering inside of you, Thomas, and they’ll stay that way until you spit them out. Let’s bury them here and get rid of those horrible memories.” Abigail pulled a blanket out of Nutmeg’s saddlebag. “I’m not Isaac and I wasn’t involved in the war but I’m your sister. If it affected you, I want to know about it.” Abigail sat down and patted the ground next to her.

“Abigail, you don’t have to do this. I’ll get better when I get away from the cornfields and the creek,” Thomas insisted.

“You can’t go around avoiding our main crop and the creek that’s behind our farm.”

“If we don’t run the cattle back, Uncle John will be sore.”

“I’ll take the blame. I’ll say Nutmeg lost a shoe or I sprained my ankle. Any more excuses?” Abigail asked with a note of frustration in her voice.

“I can see you’re not going to take no for an answer.” Thomas collapsed on the ground next to his sister. He started to tell the tale of the bloodiest battle in the war, according to those familiar with the clash at Antietam.

One of the reasons it was so difficult was the irregular terrain that included cornfields and a creek. Generals McClellan for the Union Army and Robert E. Lee for the Confederates marched their men into the direst of circumstances.

The soldiers were just boys who were told to follow orders, which they did. "Friends that I had made and trusted with my life were killed right in front of me. There were times I had to lift their dead bodies off of mine. It got really bad and I don't know if it was the egos of the men in charge, but we were ordered to continue. Most men around me were sobbing as we had just lost friends and brothers. It seemed we were next and for most soldiers present, that was true."

Abigail closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm luckier than I thought to have you come home alive, Thomas. Ma would say you were spared by God to make it home for a reason."

The tears streamed freely at that point. Thomas was shaking like a leaf in a tree during a windstorm. "No, no, Abigail. God didn't pluck me out. I was a coward who laid down with the dead because I was too scared to continue. All the men in front of me were falling dead and I did the same, only I wasn't dead."

"Thomas, you weren't even 20-years old. Whatever you did, you did to survive. You can't blame yourself for whatever choices you made. What happened next?" Abigail asked. She removed her apron and dried Thomas's tears although they kept falling.

"I don't remember much more because I lost consciousness. When the sun came up, I found myself in a sea of dead and dying men. I held the hands of men as they drew their last breath and when a small number of doctors arrived, I helped them as best I could. I've never told another person about that day. I'm ashamed." Thomas put his arms around his sister and held her tight.

"Thomas, you didn't run away. You served a purpose by being there for the soldiers in their time of need. You survived the only way you knew how and helped others in the process. If anything,

you owe it to those men who died to live a full and meaningful life. They would want you to enjoy every day you're lucky to be given. From now on when you pass a cornfield or creek think of the souls of those men. Live life in their honor."

Abigail and Thomas sat without talking as they watched blackbirds in the nearby trees and hawks diving into the meadow. A mouse made a tasty afternoon snack for the birds of prey. The barking dogs grew quiet and some took a drink from the creek. Life was teeming all around Abigail and Thomas. It was a day that Thomas felt like living, too - thanks to Abigail.

"Abigail," Thomas said.

"Yes, Thomas."

"There's enough light left to get these cattle to the other side of the farm. I'm in the mood to feel the swift breeze on my face. Life's too short to waste another minute. I fought for my freedom - I might as well enjoy it." Thomas walked to his horse and turned back. "Thank you."

"You make me proud, big brother." Abigail hopped on Nutmeg.

"Any interest in a race?" Thomas asked.

"No. It's been a long time since anyone has beaten me."

"You haven't raced me in a long time - let's go. The first one to the western edge of the farm with the most cattle wins," Thomas took off and the dogs jumped from their daze. Abigail was faster in some circumstances, but Thomas was better at making the cuts necessary to drive cattle.

Thomas won and Abigail didn't give him any kind of advantage. They were out of breath when they walked their horses back to the barn. Thomas asked Abigail a favor. "Please don't share my story with anyone. If anyone asks I will tell the truth but it's not something I'm ready to share."

"I'll keep your confidence as long as you don't tell anyone you beat me today – especially not Isaac Curry." Abigail chuckled.

"It sounds like you and Isaac have worked things out," Thomas said as he pulled the stable gate shut. "I owe a lot to Isaac and it would be nice to see the two of you married."

"Whoa. That's jumping ahead, Thomas. We'll see. But things *are* moving in the right direction."

Chapter 18

Isaac walked through the field that he and Abigail watered only a week ago and already it was growing. The stalks were at least a foot tall. Water was a simple remedy, but Isaac wouldn't have thought of it in time to save the crop.

That was all Abigail's doing, which added to the many things she had done for Isaac. They were riding Nutmeg and Dandelion later in the day, and Isaac considered letting Abigail win, but he decided that wasn't going to happen.

Despite everything, Abigail remained his fierce opponent when it came to racing horses. It didn't matter much because Abigail would beat Isaac anyway.

Isaac was getting Dandy ready to ride when Abigail walked into the stable. He knew it before she said a word because she smelled of lavender which she put in her bathwater. If not that, she placed a sprig up her sleeve, so she always smelled divine.

"Glad to see you didn't forget our ride today," Abigail chirped.

"Been looking forward to it. No twisty trails today because I don't want to have you thrown from Nutmeg again," Isaac said. He hated to see Abigail hurt but he vividly remembered holding her in his

arms that day. He thought of that moment every day and when he slept, he dreamed of it.

“Isaac, riding up here I couldn’t believe my eyes. Everything is growing beyond my expectations. I’m sure you feel the same,” Abigail said as she adjusted her bonnet.

“I think that Magnolia Hill Farm is starting to look like a working farm. Those Magnolia trees I transplanted from Hopewell have taken off. I was sure they wouldn’t make it, but now they look like they’re going to make it. One day, the trees will frame the sign that you painted for me when I wasn’t sure *I* was going to make it.” Isaac finished with Dandy and walked him out.

“Enough compliments and niceties. Let’s get going so I can beat you fair and square. It seems every time we race, one of us has an excuse.”

“Not today, Abigail. I’m going to beat you once and for all,” Isaac said.

Isaac and Abigail rode slowly side by side for a while, along the gently rolling hills which were usually golden with cornfields in the late summer. They were still picturesque, but most were abandoned farms now.

Many of the owners were either run out by outlaws or sold their farms to the varmints for next to nothing. One gang, in particular, had bought out most of the land surrounding Humble Creek. It was only a matter of time before Isaac or Uncle John were approached.

“See that pair of poplars ahead?” Abigail asked.

“I do. Is that the starting point?”

“Sure is but before we race we should make it interesting with a wager. I know, the loser has to make a meal for the winner in your kitchen. You said the stove is working and just waiting to be cooked upon,” Abigail suggested.

Isaac smiled and nodded his head in confirmation. They trotted to the starting line. When they arrived, they were met by a gang of outlaws blocking their way. They didn’t speak but let their menacing looks do the talking for them. Abigail pushed Isaac to the side of the road so the men could pass. Isaac was fine with no confrontation as long as they could continue down the road.

Before the outlaws were out of sight, one caught Isaac’s gaze. He opened his mouth in astonishment – he recognized Isaac, so he pulled up on his horse. All the outlaws remained behind him, which made him appear to be the leader of the gang. George had a long shaggy mustache and bushy eyebrows over grey eyes; he looked mean. “Major Isaac Curry; what the heck are you doing out west in my territory once again.”

“I could ask the same of you Major. The last person I expected to see west of the Mississippi was George Bale. My friend and I are just minding our own business and we’d like to continue down the road if that’s okay with you,” Isaac said. There was tension when they were on opposite sides of the war. George was fighting for the Confederate Army while Isaac fought for the Union Army. Oddly enough, in peace time, there was just as much tension, if not more.

Another outlaw whispered something in George’s ear. His eyes widened and he nodded his head. “You’re living on that fancy Magnolia Hill Farm up the way and this gal lives on Hopewell Farm,” he said, eyeing them up speculatively.

“Leave my friend out of it, George. This is about you and me,”

Isaac said as he positioned Dandy in front of Nutmeg. Abigail would be safer if he created a barrier.

"You had your battalion of men behind you back east but they ain't here to defend you anymore," George snarled. "You Union men walked away as war heroes with your choice of any job you chose and not a care in the world. My men get no respect so guess what?" George growled. "We're going to take it. Yankee men aren't going to hold us down any longer."

Isaac thought of his suffering and Thomas too. He started to sweat and it dripped down his temples. It took every bit of control he could muster not to lunge from his saddle and throttle George Bale.

"I've worked hard for everything I have. Can you say the same Major Bale?"

"I'm not going to waste any more of my men's time. Since you own such a pretty plot of land. I assure you we'll be talking again very soon. Don't get too comfortable." George started to ride off.

Isaac had to have the last word. "If you touch what's mine, I'll come after you. I won on the battlefield and you can bet I'll win again," Isaac said.

George and his gang rode away in a thunderous cloud of dust. Isaac was clearly shaken by the encounter. "Are you okay, Isaac," Abigail asked.

"No, I'm not. I fought against Major George Bale and his men on more occasions than I care to recall. I hate to admit it, but George was a good soldier, but he was the enemy. We developed a lot of bad blood in the times we met on the battlefield. He's not your regular outlaw because he's smart and relentless."

“What do you think he’ll do, Isaac?” Abigail asked.

“He’ll take what he wants and won’t stop until he gets it. Now that he knows I’m here – who knows how far he’ll go.”

Abigail reached for Isaac’s arm. “Isaac, you’re trembling and you’re soaked with sweat. I’ve only seen you this way once before. At least this time, you didn’t react badly, which is progress. I believe in you. George is not going to ruin our lives. He lost with the Confederate Army and he’s going to lose again. Humble Creek will not bow down to George Bale.”

Isaac wished he were as confident as Abigail. Although he appreciated the faith she had in him. Isaac needed to think strategically so he could figure out George’s next move. One thing Isaac was sure of was saving Magnolia Hill and Hopewell Farms. Whether it would be without bloodshed was the question.

Isaac didn’t say much on the ride home because he didn’t know what to say. He wanted Abigail safe and the less involved she was, the better. She insisted on making him cornbread and gravy, at least. She didn’t want him going to bed on an empty stomach when he was so upset.

"Interested in a sip of whiskey with your food?" Abigail asked.

“Yes. Normally, I’d turn down a drink but seeing George Bale shook me up. I didn’t react as badly as I would have a month ago, but it took a lot out of me,” Isaac said as he took the tin cup from Abigail.

“That’s progress that you didn’t overreact to George – don’t you

agree?" Abigail asked.

"I suppose but I'm not feeling like too much of a success. I spent time telling Thomas that he was a survivor and he had so much left to give – never give up. I neglected to take my own advice, Abigail." Isaac took a drink and winced because he didn't drink alcohol much. He saw too many men rely on a drink to numb the pain. He didn't want to end up in a permanent stupor. "Seeing George Bale wearing a red scarf and sitting high in the saddle made me feel like I was back in Virginia."

Abigail giggled nervously. "I didn't even think of Union colors being blue and gold when I gave you the blue scarf around your neck. I'm glad I didn't choose red."

Isaac smiled. "It would have still been a wonderful gift, but I doubt I would have worn it." Isaac popped the last morsel of food in his mouth. "The very last thing I want to do is bring harm to you or your family. You asked me to stay so I might help Hopewell Farm and Humble Creek but now it looks like I'm putting you in more danger. George and his men already had their eyes on our farms, now they have double the reason to steal our land," Isaac said.

"If it weren't for George having been your enemy on the battlefield, he would have come up with another reason. At least you have some idea of how his mind works. You said you faced him on many occasions." As always, Abigail was looking for ways to turn a bad situation around.

Isaac shook his head. "I appreciate you trying, Abigail, but this is a bad situation all around. If I was better or he was, we wouldn't both be here. The Confederate army lost the war and he'd like to get even by winning this war. The war for the heart and soul of Humble Creek."

“He must have put the war behind him by now,” Abigail said hopefully.

Isaac tried to think of a way to explain the situation to Abigail. “Let’s say a wasp flies at you and you swat it, but don’t kill it because you don’t want to get stung. You ever notice how that same bug comes back at you meaner than before?”

“I guess,” Abigail said.

“George is like that wasp – he didn’t win so he’s meaner than ever.” Isaac yawned. He’d talked about George enough, but he wanted to stay awake because Abigail was with him. He felt bad that their beautiful day together was ruined by his past. The war and his life back east kept creeping up – Isaac was beginning to think there was no way out.

“I’m going to leave you for the night, but I’ll be back in the morning to check on you. I want to make sure your dreams were at least tolerable,” Abigail said.

“You can’t think I’m letting you ride home by yourself – not with outlaws out there with eyes on this place. I’ll ride with you to your front door. John would skin me alive if I let anyone touch a hair on your head. Never mind, I’d encourage him to do it because I’d could never forgive myself if anything happened to you, Abigail.”

Isaac rode down the path with Abigail. The smell of sweet lavender blew through the warm air. Despite everything that happened during the day, Isaac had spent time with Abigail and that made everything else tolerable. They reached the porch steps and it was time to say goodnight.

Isaac wanted to kiss Abigail, but he didn’t think it was the right

time to show his affection. They hadn't even talked about courting. Abigail was too good to draw into his messy life, Isaac thought. He watched her walk up the stairs and disappear through the screen door.

Isaac led Nutmeg to the Anders' barn and gave him to their stable boy. Then he rode the back way home to Magnolia Hill Farm. His eyes darted around, and he flinched at every noise. Isaac was sure outlaws were positioned around his property, watching his every move. He nearly pulled his gun when Abner suddenly appeared from behind the potting shed.

"What in the sam hill are you doing out here at night?" Isaac asked Abner.

"Same as you, I expect. Making sure outlaws don't come on to your land. It's like them to take advantage of the darkness." Abner carried a lantern and a pistol.

"Thanks for caring, Abner, but I don't think you'll get too far with only one pistol against those gunslingers." Abner meant well but he'd be really outgunned if he went up against the outlaws.

"I figure I could at least shoot *one* of them. He'd probably still shoot me, but I would have died trying," Abner said.

Isaac smiled. "I appreciate your willingness but I'd rather have you alive and ready to shoot another day, Abner. You go on home to your bed."

"Thanks, Boss. I'll see you tomorrow – God willing."

Isaac was fortunate in that he was surrounded by good people in Humble Creek.

Chapter 19

Isaac spent the next few days doing chores, which was the life of a farmer and he'd grown to love it. The pump ran dry one morning and the farm hands were worried. Isaac could hear the loud talking in the yard.

"What in heaven's name is going on over there, Abner? Isaac asked his foreman who was on horseback, coming to alert Isaac, who stood on the porch.

"I knew the day would come. We're out of water and all the crops will die," Abner said.

Isaac was relatively new to the area, but he knew water was plentiful in Humble Creek. The problem was that he didn't have the smartest bunch of men working his land. They made up for it in other ways like their hardworking ways and good humor.

"Tell the boys to check the pipe until they find what's blocking the water. Last time this happened a chipmunk crawled inside – poor thing. Make sure they know the world's not ending and we still have water."

Isaac went back inside the house and stepped into his boots. Each time he put his boots on, which was every day, he thought of the

tannery back home and his brothers who perished. He had loved his brothers and had looked up to them. He wanted to make Ladd, Michael and Sam proud.

He hoped that by making something out of Magnolia Hill Farm, he would do just that. Things were coming together, and Isaac was happy with the work he'd done – who would have thought a store owner from Boston would be a farmer in the west.

Isaac hadn't seen George or any of his men for days, which was a good sign. Except, Isaac always thought something was wrong when it was too quiet. That probably came from sneak attacks from the enemy during the war. Never trust the silence – that's what he was taught, and he never forgot it.

Isaac sat on his front porch and wondered if life was ever going to change or if he was always going to be on the alert. It wouldn't be fair to invite a woman like Abigail into a life where he had to remain on watch every day. It would make her feel unsafe just being around him.

Isaac wondered if he went back east, things might be safer for the Anders family and Hopewell Farm. He could sell some cattle to pay for his fare to Boston. His younger brothers would welcome him with open arms, and he would be forgotten quickly by everyone in Humble Creek.

As he was contemplating leaving California for good a ray of sunshine caught his eye. Abigail was walking past the magnolias towards his front porch.

Abigail had a spring in her step which wasn't unusual. She wore her drab green dress with a crisp white apron. Only she could make something so drab look so beautiful. Abigail sparkled and she

could make a potato sack look beautiful. She carried a jug in one hand and a paper sack in the other.

"You look deep in thought. It's been a few days and I imagine you've been as busy as me," Abigail said. "I brought a jug of sweet tea that my ma made. I thought we could share a cup."

"Sounds good. I smell something in the bag, Abigail, and I can see steam escaping out the top. What are you hiding in there?" Isaac asked.

"I made raspberry scones and I have the scratches up and down my arm to prove that I picked the fruit myself. Nearly lost a gallon of blood in the process, but I think they're worth it."

They sat and rocked on side by side rocking chairs. The tea was refreshing and the scones divine. Abigail even brought freshly churned butter to slather on top.

"How are Jane, John, and Thomas?" Isaac asked.

"Oh, you know – nothing new. John is grumpy, Ma is worried. But Thomas is doing remarkably well. He snuck out of the house early and did the chores without me."

"Abigail, sounds like you're cross that Thomas didn't wait for you," Isaac teased. "Are you beginning to feel as if you're not as badly needed as you were before."

Abigail blushed. "No...well, maybe a little. I guess I'm just protective of him. It's time to set Thomas free, I suppose."

"Thomas still needs you plenty Abigail. It's admirable that you love your brother so much. He's lucky to have you. Thomas will have

bad days, but I think he's more able than before to deal with his memories," Isaac said as he sipped his tea.

"He spoke to me about some of the specific memories that he'd been holding back. It helped tremendously," Abigail said. "I was wondering what exactly *you* went through on the battlefield."

Isaac let out a heavy sigh. "Abigail, do you really want to be drawn further into my world? It's not always a place for a lady."

Abigail looked directly into Isaac's hazel eyes. "I appreciate you calling me a lady but I'm more. I'm someone that cares about you and I want to know where you've been and what you experienced."

"I know of a place we might be more comfortable," Isaac said as he led Abigail to the bench beneath the willow tree.

"You put a bench here," she said, her eyes glowing.

"Well, it was a good suggestion," Isaac said, giving her a warm smile. "I had Abner build this. It'll be nice in the rain because we won't get soaked from the grass."

Isaac started by telling Abigail the day the four oldest Curry boys set out to enlist. One of them probably ought to have stayed behind as man of the house but they were all committed to serving. They left with their ma's blessing and two of their younger brothers behind.

"My ma - her name was Adelaide - began to regret her blessing as my brothers died. Losing one child was unimaginable but three... well, it crushed her soul. In the back of my mind, I knew I'd have to make it home for my ma's sanity. When I did make it home, it was too late. My mother already died of a broken heart," Isaac said

somberly.

"I can't imagine, without having children yet, but I'm sure it would be like losing a piece of oneself."

"That sounds about right, Abigail. You probably heard George call me Major Curry, which was accurate. I was a private and I didn't aspire to rise through the ranks. Most folks didn't unless they had grandiose plans for their lives. Becoming a corporal made me proud but as I went on to become a sergeant, I realized folks were dying ahead of me. My captain was shot through the belly when he was standing next to me and so I became captain. The rank of major came the same way."

"Where were you on the map when you became a major?" Abigail asked.

Isaac was surprised that she had an interest in the details of his service. It felt oddly good to talk about it. "North Carolina mostly, Hatteras to be exact. The damp musty smell and rotting vegetation will forever be with me. That's where I met up with Major George Bail. He was a slippery character who did things like sending spies into my company to learn where we would go next. It took me a while to figure him out when he kept showing up ready to defend what we planned to attack. The thing about George then that worries me now is his keen intelligence. Is this boring, Abigail?"

"No, it's not one single bit boring. I can't know you unless I know about your past. Continue," Abigail said, sipping her lemonade.

"The last time I saw George Bail was at Hatteras in a battle neither of us won. My company, at that point, numbered 100 men and only 10 survived. It was a waste of lives because we didn't win. The Confederates lost just as many men. George lured us onto a

peninsula and once there we had no way out.

They shot my men one by one, but they didn't get away with it because an advancing Union brigade caught them on their way out. The death toll was catastrophic and if George has an ounce of human blood, that day remains with him. The guilt I feel to this day is mountainous. So many men died."

"Isaac, you didn't kill those men," Abigail said.

Isaac stood up. "You don't understand – no one understands unless they were there," he said loudly and brandished his finger at Abigail. Then he suddenly looked contrite.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have raised my voice. You said I didn't kill those men, but I killed others. They were sons, brothers, husbands. The eyes of the men I killed still haunt me and always will. Those memories will never vanish, nor should they."

"I don't know what to say. You were a soldier fighting for a cause and a way of life that you believed in. Peace is something that you have to fight for, unfortunately. We can keep working together for the peace we have and make it more widespread. We will find a way to make our farms and Humble Creek places that we are proud to call home. Don't worry, Isaac – tranquility, and prosperity will win," Abigail said.

Isaac found it hard to argue with such a beautiful and positive woman. He couldn't possibly run back east while Abigail remained fighting for peace in Humble Creek. Isaac's strongest hope was that harm not come to sweet Abigail. "Thank you for listening and not judging me or my past actions."

They both looked up when they heard hoof beats. It was George

Bail himself approaching.

“We’ve got company, Abigail,” Isaac said. They stood up as George got off his horse and walked over.

“Major Curry, your farm is even more beautiful now that I’m on it. Crops look healthy and so do your cattle. Between Magnolia hill and Hopewell, you have the best land in humble Creek,” George said. Five outlaws were with him.

“I’m plain old Isaac now, let’s dispense with the ranks.” Isaac put his arm back to shield Abigail and make sure she kept a distance.

“Fine by me, Isaac. If you don’t know by now, my men and I have been taking most of the land in this county. I own all of Friendship Bend and now I’m looking at Humble Creek. We invite everyone to stick around but I’ll be making the rules. You follow my rules and we’ll all get along. Since we have a history, I’m not going to take your land but offer to purchase it.”

Isaac put up his hand – palm facing out. “Stop right there, George. Magnolia Hill Farm isn’t for sale and my neighbor John Anders isn’t selling either. No negotiation and I won’t be fooled. You don’t want to live side-by-side in peace. You’ll leave us with nothing, so we have no choice but to leave,” Isaac said.

"Truth be told, I plan on using your land as a base. The gentle slope in the back will make a good look-out. I learned my lesson back in North Carolina and no one will sneak up on me again." George handed Isaac a slip of paper. The offer to buy the farm was for less than half its worth. "That's as good an offer as you'll get – believe me. I'll give you until sunrise tomorrow to think it over." George snickered.

Isaac ripped up the paper and threw it at George. "You will never get my farm," Isaac said. He would have lunged at George but the five outlaws with guns made him think twice.

George rode away and grabbed a flower off the magnolia tree as he passed it. He crushed it in his hand and threw it to the ground. "See you at Sunrise," George said as he rode down the path.

Isaac felt like a failure. Abigail was speechless.

Chapter 20

Abigail said goodbye and hopped on Nutmeg. She rode down the path because she didn't know what else to do. When she reached the farm sign, which she painted on the day Isaac arrived, Abigail turned back. She lectured Thomas and Isaac about never giving up and she found herself on the verge of doing that herself.

There was a tightness in her chest that Abigail never felt before. She had never felt hopeless before, but she knew running away wasn't the answer. She charged back to Isaac's house as quickly as she left.

"Isaac, tell me that didn't just happen?" Abigail asked but unfortunately, she knew the answer. She slid off her horse.

"I'm sorry, Abigail. If I hadn't set foot in Humble Creek, none of this would be happening," Isaac said as he hung his head.

"Oh, no. Don't hang your head in front of me, Isaac Curry." Abigail threw her hands on her hips and stomped her foot. She created a puff of dust. "I stopped and helped you that day so you might as well blame me. It doesn't matter how we got where we are – we're here. It's time to stop placing blame because we don't have the time for these games."

“You’re right as always, Abigail. I’m not sure what to do next. Do you have ideas?” Isaac asked.

Isaac was called out to the field by a farmhand who was having an issue with a bull. Abigail told him to go and that she would remain on the porch and think about what to do.

She pulled off her bonnet and rubbed her temples because not only was her chest feeling funny, but her head ached. She was tempted to go inside and have a sip of whiskey but that wasn't a wise choice.

Abigail had a clear view of Hopewell Farm from where she was sitting. The farm was the only home Abigail knew and it had always been her wish to live there forever. It would be where she raised a family and watched generations enjoy the beautiful tranquility the farm offered.

She and Thomas gave Jane and Ezra a tough time, but she and her brother had survived their childhood. Abigail had slipped on the rocks in the creek and split open her chin when she was eight. She still had a scar, although it faded through the years.

Thomas jumped from the loft in the barn with hopes of landing on the hay below. He missed and spent an entire summer in the house while his broken leg healed. Then the war came and the men left, which seemed like the worst that could happen. With Uncle John’s help, they survived and even flourished.

But losing the farm to outlaws would be unlike any of those things – it was an insurmountable problem. The farm would be gone and the Anders family would have nowhere to go.

Isaac walked back from the field. “Have you thought of a plan to

keep the peace around here?" he asked. Isaac was kidding because he knew there was no obvious plan.

"I was just thinking of how much Hopewell Farm means to me. I'm in a state of panic, which is not like me," Abigail said, wrapping her arms around herself.

"If I sell, there's a chance George and his men will be satisfied and leave you and your family alone. I could restart my life in Boston. Maybe I never should have left, and this is a sign that I don't belong in Humble Creek," Isaac suggested.

Losing both Hopewell Farm and Isaac would destroy Abigail. She couldn't even think about it or she'd fall to pieces. All the dreams she had of a future in Humble Creek with Isaac by her side were destroyed.

Surely he wouldn't have suggested leaving if he had feelings for her. Isaac's proposition was the worst idea she ever heard. "Bad idea, Isaac. There is no way George won't take our land too. If not him then another gang of outlaws would come along. We're going to have to find a way to keep both Magnolia Hill and Hopewell Farm. We're stronger if we stick together."

"I wonder, Abigail, if Humble Creek can be a safe place again. Living on a battlefield won't be good for you, Thomas or the rest of your family," Isaac said. "Abigail, Thomas isn't strong enough yet to get involved in this. You have to do everything you can to keep him out of this turmoil."

"I agree." Abigail said, then she suddenly felt overwhelmed by everything and her legs gave out on her. She sat down heavily on the porch swing. "The thought of losing the farm is too much for my heart and head to handle. Then, you have to make it worse by

saying you are selling and leaving Humble Creek. How can that be a good idea?"

Isaac sat down on the swing beside her and leaned against the back.

"We make quite a pair. Neither one of us can come up with an idea. Soon the sun will go down and the next thing I know it will be sunrise with George knocking at my door. I wish there were a way to stop time." Isaac yanked off his hat and started raking his hands through his hair. Abigail knew he only did that when he was upset.

As Abigail stood up and regained her wits she heard Uncle John calling from the porch at Hopewell. Only his booming voice could be heard from such a great distance. It worked better than the dinner bell when she and Thomas were nippers. It didn't look like she was going to get a commitment to stay in Humble creek from Isaac.

"As you can hear. It's time for me to head home. Uncle John will be at the end of the path waiting for me, so you need not worry about outlaws. Try and get some sleep tonight – know that I'll be thinking of you." Abigail picked up her bonnet and started to leave but turned back. "Don't even think about sneaking away at night. That would be cowardly." She jokingly wagged her finger. Abigail hoped she knew Isaac well enough to know he wouldn't do such a thing.

"Don't worry, Abigail. The last thing I want to be remembered as is a coward." Isaac replaced his hat and smiled half-heartedly.

As Abigail walked down the path to meet Uncle John, she wondered how much about George and his gang she should share

with her family. Isaac stated that Thomas wasn't strong enough to deal with the situation. Keeping secrets would hurt more in the long run so Abigail decided to share as much as possible.

"Missing dinner is becoming a habit, Abigail," Uncle John said. "I know you're a grown woman but you're still a part of this family. It's disrespectful to your Ma when you don't show up, not to mention cleaning up after the meal is your chore."

Abigail didn't say much as they walked. "I'll be sure to be home by dinner from now on. I've let Ma do most of the preparation in recent weeks and that's not fair."

They continued to walk as the sun was beginning to set over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The days were becoming shorter and Abigail had felt a renewed urgency to enjoy each one of them. With outlaws threatening, she didn't know how many more she'd have. The earthy smell of autumn smelled sweeter and the changing colors on the mountaintops were more remarkable. Abigail didn't dread the upcoming rains or the mud that came with them.

"What's wrong, Abigail?" Uncle John asked. "Don't say nothing because I've known you my entire life and you're never without something to say."

Abigail puffed her cheeks and breathed out slowly. "There's trouble on the horizon, Uncle John. The outlaws are closing in and I don't think there's a thing we can do." That was true but vague.

"What in the name of goodness is happening, Abigail?" John asked. "Tell me what's happened. We've known there was a threat, but it sounds like it's gotten worse."

They arrived at the front porch and Abigail realized she had to say something to keep Uncle John quiet. The conversation would upset Thomas, so she decided not to tell him unless necessary. "I want to tell you and I will, Uncle. But it involves Isaac Curry and we'll explain everything to you but first he has a decision to make. He'll know in the morning."

"When is Isaac going to get around to deciding." Uncle John's voice was getting louder. "If this affects Hopewell then I have the right to know – now."

"Sunrise tomorrow. Can we keep this between the two of us until then, please," Abigail pleaded.

"You're lucky to be my favorite niece. I don't like keeping secrets, but I will. Just till tomorrow?"

"Yes. And Uncle John?"

"Yes, Abigail."

"I'm your only niece." Abigail laughed and John kissed her on the forehead.

Abigail and John didn't say anything to Thomas and Jane and neither her brother or mother asked any questions. They spent a great deal of time complimenting the corn chowder, which they had regularly in the Anders home. Jane added ham, deer meat or whatever was available to add variety.

Thomas talked about the cattle and seemed happy to be joining the family conversation and not brooding in his room. Inside, Abigail knew that it would be one of the last normal dinners they would have and she had no idea what would become of them after

tomorrow morning. She hoped that no matter what they'd be together and healthy.

"I'm going to bed early, Ma. I'll clean up and then retire to my room. I have to mend Thomas's trousers but I'll do that in the morning," Abigail said.

"That's fine dear. Make sure you let them out a bit because Thomas is putting on weight, which is a blessing. God is taking care of this family and it shows that my prayers are being answered."

Abigail scurried to her room. She couldn't pull her quilt over her face fast enough. She was restless as expected as she turned the day's events over in her mind. Abigail was sure Isaac was having the same kind of night – probably worse.

Before meeting Isaac, losing Hopewell Farm was the worst thing that could have happened to her. Now it was losing Isaac that would create the biggest hole in her heart. The farm wouldn't be as enjoyable if Isaac wasn't toiling away at Magnolia Hill Farm, while she did the same at Hopewell.

Finally, the yellow warbler started singing and Abigail knew it was less than an hour from sunrise. She tried to imagine exactly where Isaac was standing and what was going through his mind.

Abigail had confidence that Isaac would make the right choice. He was agonizing regardless of the choice he was leaning towards making. Abigail stepped out of bed and looked across to Isaac's bedroom window. It was dark but a lantern was lit in the parlor by the front porch. Abigail collapsed on her knees and said a quiet prayer.

Chapter 21

Isaac didn't bother going to his room and diving under the quilt because he knew he wouldn't sleep. He threw a few logs in the wood-burning stove to ward off the evening chill.

George Bail was close and it was as if he could smell him. Isaac had a sense for danger that he developed during the war. Most soldiers could either see, smell, or feel when danger was coming.

Isaac's friend Felix who fought alongside him in north Carolina felt when danger was near; a feeling that never failed. He was sitting next to Isaac at camp when his feet started itching. There was no sign of the enemy, as far as anyone else knew. Moments later, Felix was shot in the belly.

Isaac had enough time to run for cover, so Felix's itchy feet saved him. Isaac's mind drifted back to the fact that now George Bail had reentered his life. Isaac was once again questioning why he survived - and people like George Bail - when Felix and many other soldiers hadn't.

Isaac heard someone on his front porch, and he assumed George had come a few hours early. Unlike him. The sun was still sleeping. Isaac made sure his gun was in his holster and ready to be cocked and fired if need be. "You're early George. Come back later – after

sunrise as you said."

"It's not George but you can call me what you want, boss," Abner said.

"What are you doing up in the dead of night?" Isaac asked. He walked out and joined Abner.

"I saw the light and I hoped it was you here alone," Abner said. He had fear in his eyes.

"Who'd you think might be with me, Abner?"

"Not sure but I saw scoundrels visiting you earlier and I hated to think that they might overpower you and take over the farm. I've heard it can happen just like that," Abner said as his eyes nervously darted around.

"As you can see, I'm still standing. Thanks for your concern Abner but I might be needing your support in the future. Just knowing that I have folks like you on my side helps a lot. I'd caution you against trying to be a hero with that particular gang of outlaws. They shoot straight and they shoot to kill – they're not your ordinary group of bandits," Isaac said. "They fought in the war."

"Well, it sounds like you know what you're doing for now, but I'll be sure to keep an eye on the farm. Don't forget to sleep, Boss." Abner tipped his hat and disappeared into the night.

Isaac closed the door and continued to pace. Waiting and worrying were no ways he wanted to live life. While Isaac was a soldier, he was always looking over his shoulder for the enemy.

He hated the feeling of constantly being on edge, which is the way

he was feeling at the moment. Isaac could run with the clothes on his back and the gun in his holster. George could have Magnolia Hill Farm. It may make him forget about Hopewell and he'd leave the Anders family alone.

Isaac closed his eyes and thought about George and the type of man he became after the war. Vengeance was on his mind and he knew Abigail meant something to Isaac. He'd never leave her alone or Hopewell Farm. Isaac was not about to let anything happen to Abigail or any member of her family. Isaac had to keep them safe.

An armed standoff between the people left in Humble Creek and George's gang was a possibility. There were consequences not only to farmers who weren't ready to go up against an ex-Confederate Major but to Thomas.

Bringing violence back into his life would destroy him and all the progress he'd made. He'd leave town just like his father did, which would ruin Abigail and Jane's life. They'd never get over losing both of them.

Isaac knew fighting would turn him into something he didn't want to be. It would make him into someone Abigail would forever despise. Isaac would rather die than have Abigail look upon him with scorn. Isaac was running out of options and sunrise was near.

He walked to the porch and looked out on the farm he created with the help of the good people of Humble Creek. There were rows of corn so straight that they looked fake. Cattle were happily grazing and had reproduced thanks to the bulls from Vern Keller. Isaac had more chickens than he knew what to do with and a fair number of pigs.

Isaac never had the feeling of having created something himself

and would be heartbroken to see it used as a base for violence. Abner would get lost in the further destruction of Humble Creek. No one thought much of the simple man before, but Isaac gave him a chance and he was successful.

A tear trickled down Isaac's cheek. He didn't know if it was for Abigail, the farm, or the good folks of Humble Creek. As he patted his face dry with his blue scarf, Isaac realized, he would have to fight for it all. It scared the heck out of him and in his heart he knew fighting was useless – but he had no choice.

Isaac sat on his front porch rocker and waited for the sun to rise. He looked out at the willow tree and the bench built for Abigail. Isaac had many good memories on Magnolia Hill Farm that even though times were tense, the thoughts brought a smile to his face. He thought of the dandelion and the hope that it brought him; hope he wouldn't have had without Abigail.

The thunderous sound of hooves pulled Isaac from his reverie. It was George Bail approaching with his gang of scoundrels close behind. Isaac stood and prepared to stand his ground.

Chapter 22

George's men stayed back and remained on their horses.

Each one had his hand inches from his gun, ready to pull the trigger on George's command.

George himself climbed down from his horse and tugged at his unkempt mustache. Isaac doubted he had trimmed the thing since the war. "I see you've been waiting. Did you get any sleep last night?" George asked and laughed with his familiar sinister snicker.

"I'm fine with sleep but thank you for your concern," Isaac said sarcastically. "The morning is my favorite time on Magnolia Hill Farm. Seeing the sunrise over the mountains and the critters out that you don't normally see. This place is special and makes you want to sleep less just so you can enjoy it."

"Sounds poetic as if your girl Abigail came up with the sentiments," George snickered. "I have the money and I assume you're ready with the deed to the land. I know you're a lot of things, Isaac, but a stupid man you're not. Do we have a deal?"

"No we don't George. The only way I'm leaving this property is in a pine box. When are you going to learn George; you have to work hard to get things. I worked day and night to make this farm what

it is and what you're offering ain't enough." Isaac thought for a moment. "No amount of money will ever be enough. This is my home."

"Think twice before I leave down that path. This is a one time offer and going forward you're going to have to deal with the consequences. There were a few rules in the war that I'll admit I broke a time or two. Out here in the west, there ain't no rules. You won't be safe, and I can't guarantee safety to anyone you come in contact with." George gazed across the way towards Hopewell to make his point.

Isaac felt shivers down his spine when he thought of anything happening to Abigail and her family. It would be Isaac's fault and he was trying to conceal the agony he was feeling. If George knew what a soft spot he had for Abigail Anders, he'd go right after her.

"I don't need to think twice George. I'd regret it and life just comes around once. I don't want to live it with regrets," Isaac said. He spread his feet and crossed his arms – signaling he was done.

"I guess you see things differently than your brother Sam. He begged for his life before he was killed – would have done anything we told him to do. I think he would have been a spy for the Confederate army if asked. We didn't give him a chance before he took a bullet to the head." George laughed as he walked back to his horse.

Isaac knew that George was baiting him by mentioning his brother Sam. He knew his brother. Sam would never consider becoming a spy for the side that supported the continuation of slavery.

Of all the Curry boys, he was the most committed to the cause of the Union Army. Isaac couldn't show George that his words in any

way affected him.

“I’m not my brother and there is no comparison to be made. If there’s nothing else, will you and your men kindly leave my property,” Isaac said sternly.

“Enjoy the tranquility while you can. We’ll be seeing each other again soon,” George said. He spit on the ground before leaving.

Isaac saw storm clouds coming down from the mountains; the rains were coming. It was an ominous sign – sunny pleasant times were behind him.

Abigail, however, would see it differently. She’d say the crops were going to get much needed water. In other words, the clouds weren’t a bad omen, but a good one.

There was no time to waste. At present, Isaac still had a farm to run. There was no time to worry about what might come. The chickens needed care. Their morning calls for food were getting loud.

The animals had brains no bigger than a pea, but their personalities were bigger than that. Isaac thought of his chickens as training for when he was a parent. He wasn’t comparing the two, by any means, but they both required daily care. If Isaac said that out loud, Abigail would laugh.

The dominant chicken among dozens in the coop was Annabelle. The fat buff chicken pushed herself to the front of the flock at feeding time and made the loudest noise. Isaac knew that chickens were livestock and someday she’d meet her demise, but Isaac didn’t like to think like that.

Abner warned him against naming any of his livestock because a farmer should never get attached to his animals - except maybe horses. It was a part of life as a farmer that Isaac was still getting used to.

Farming wasn't in Isaac Curry's blood, but it would be for his children and hopefully for generations to come. George Bail was not going to destroy that dream. As Isaac thought about his future, Abigail was always in it. He couldn't imagine life without the golden haired beauty and the way she looked was only a small part of what made her special.

Isaac loved the way Abigail stood up for what was right, and her loyalty was matchless. Thomas wasn't perfect. John was gruff. Her mother was always worrying. And Isaac considered himself flawed. But none of that mattered. Abigail looked at the ones she loved and only saw good. Isaac had to defend her just like she did everyone else.

"Are you talking to your chickens again, Boss?" Abner poked his head into the barn. He was finishing his work in the hayloft.

Isaac smiled. "You caught me, Abner. I was hoping to see you this morning."

"What do you have to tell me?" Abner asked.

"I want you to hold on tight because things are about to get crazy around here. The outlaws will be coming for Magnolia Hill Farm. They made me an offer and I'm not selling. I'm standing my ground and if you want nothing to do with this place, I'll understand. It's not your duty to defend my farm."

Abner stood ramrod straight. "It's my honor to stand by your side,

Isaac. Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

Isaac smiled and shook his head in disbelief. He didn't expect so much loyalty from Abner. "All you can do is be aware. Thank you. You're a good friend, Abner, and I'll do anything I can to protect you.

Isaac was scared to fight and didn't know how his mind would react. What he did know was that it was the right thing to do.

Chapter 23

Abigail sat quietly at breakfast. She didn't want to get into a discussion with John until she learned what Isaac had said to George. Letting Jane and Thomas know what was happening would have to wait until Abigail had Isaac by her side.

She knew that by now, George Bail had come and gone, and Isaac's decision had been made. Isaac might already be on a train back east – a thought that made Abigail shudder. Could Isaac really leave without a proper farewell? She wouldn't know until she went to the farm and saw his face – or not.

"Abigail," Uncle John said. "Are you going to see Isaac this morning?" he asked.

Abigail knew Uncle John wanted details about Isaac and the outlaws. He was patient but not that patient. "Yes, after I help with the house chores. I don't want to leave Ma with too much to do."

"Okay, just don't dawdle too long. Remember our discussion." John was impatient and rightly so.

"How are you feeling, Thomas?" Abigail asked.

"Every day that goes by, I feel better. Talking to Isaac and you has

allowed me to understand that the war is in the past. I'm home and safe. The violence and despair was left on the battlefield where it belongs. How can anything so far away affect me? There's no more Confederate soldiers to come and get me here in Humble Creek," Thomas said.

Abigail nearly choked on her eggs. Thomas was going to be devastated if there was more violence in his future. He'd suffer a setback for sure.

Abigail finished breakfast and her morning house chores before leaving for Magnolia Hill Farm. Abigail was uncharacteristically nervous as she walked up the path towards Isaac's house. She had good memories about visiting him in the past with sweets for him to devour.

Back then, Isaac's biggest issue was plants that required a dose of water. Things had taken a dark turn and lives of loved ones were at stake. She took a deep breath of fresh air and put on a cheerful face. Isaac needed her positive outlook in this dire situation. If he hadn't left, of course.

Isaac stepped out on his porch and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm still here."

Abigail's heart soared. "I can see that. Did George Bail decide he doesn't want Magnolia Hill farm, after all?" Abigail asked hopefully. She knew that was very unlikely.

"I think you know things didn't work out that way. I'm not going to allow George Bail to take away what I've worked so hard to create. More importantly, I'm not going to let him get away with hurting the people I've come to consider family," Isaac said.

“The future is uncertain, but I think you did the right thing, Isaac. Now, we have to let my family hear about your plans. Uncle John knows a little, but Thomas and my ma are completely unaware. I’m nervous about how Thomas will react. I’d like you there when he finds out.” Abigail flattened the creases out of her dress and fussed with her straw hat. These were things she did when nervous.

“No time like the present, I like to say. Let’s walk over now,” Isaac said.

“I like the way you think, Isaac. No use spending the day worrying how they’ll react. I won’t get a thing done. I was sewing buttons on a shirt this morning and accidentally attached my dress sleeve to the shirt. I’m not very productive when worried.”

Jane was surprised by the requested family meeting in the middle of the day when there was work to be done. She worried as usual but this time her fretting was warranted.

Thomas had been up since before the sun rose and he was happy to be called in from the field because he needed a break. A full day took some getting used to after spending the better part of the year in bed.

Uncle John was expecting the sit-down and was anxious to hear where things stood between Isaac and George Bail. They sat around the kitchen table as Isaac and Abigail explained how George Bail and the outlaws came into play.

“Did he follow you all the way from North Carolina?” Thomas asked incredulously. He probably was worried maybe his enemies would come after him too.

Abigail was the first to calm his fears. "It was by sheer coincidence that George and Isaac ended up in Humble Creek. No one that you encountered during the war is coming to get you Thomas." Abigail patted her brother's shoulders to keep him calm.

Isaac cleared his throat. "After spending the night considering my options, I decided it would be best for me to stand my ground."

Uncle John pounded on the table so hard it shook. "What a relief. I see no option besides fighting to keep our land."

The word fight, set Thomas off. He threw his head in his hands and ran from the table. He slammed the door to his bedroom shut.

"That's just what I was afraid of. Just like that, Thomas is back to where he was when he first came home from the war," Abigail said. "I'm not so sure this plan is going to be worth it."

"I'll talk to Thomas. It worked before," Isaac said. "I don't necessarily want to fight, John. A peaceful resolution is what I'm hoping for. I'm not as fragile as Thomas but it's not going to take much to push me over the edge. You saw how Thomas reacted to the mention of fighting - I just don't know."

"I think sometimes, the wrong members of the Anders family went to the war. What is it with weak men around here," John said.

"No disrespect intended, John but I don't think Thomas is weak nor am I. The war changes a man and teaches him that violence isn't always the answer. After you've been to war, the mention of conflict can bring up horrible memories."

"I think we've said enough for now. Isaac has shared everything he knows. Maybe George is all talk and no action. We may never hear

from George and his outlaw gang again. Isaac may have scared him away by standing his ground.”

Jane was quiet because talking about violence after losing her husband during the war and having barely gotten her son back, was too much to handle. Abigail could see the color drain from Jane Ander’s face. She took her mother’s hand. “Ma we came to the family, so we didn’t have to keep secrets. It was not our intention to frighten you,” Abigail said.

“I’m heading home while you all think about what you want to do next. If you think it’s best for me to leave Humble Creek for good then that’s what I’ll do. The last thing I want is to bring harm to the Anders family and Hopewell Farm,” Isaac said as he tipped his hat and walked out.

Before Isaac could step off the porch, Abigail called him back. “Let’s sit and talk for a moment. I sense that you’re blaming yourself for all of this and you’d be wrong to think that. My ma doesn’t blame anyone – she’s scared and hasn’t even started to process this. The farm is the last thing she has from my father – besides Thomas and I, and all their memories of building a life together exist here.”

“You have to admit I had a lot to do with putting your family in this mess,” Isaac said.

Abigail was sitting close to Isaac on the porch swing and the attraction between them was powerful. “The outlaws were coming whether you came to Humble Creek or not. At least now we have someone to help protect us. Are you still thinking of leaving?”

Isaac’s hazel eyes locked on Abigail’s sparkling green eyes. He breathed heavily. “No, Abigail, I’m not going anywhere. I will stay

to protect you and your family's way of life. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. You have my word and keeping my word is something I take very seriously. The last time I made a solemn vow was to my ma. I promised I would make it home from the war. I kept that promise."

"You did but your mother died – I'm sorry." Abigail reached the short distance between them and covered his hands with hers.

"I'm embarrassed that I even considered leaving. I want you to feel safe Abigail – you deserve it. I imagine it's impossible with all the chaos I brought to Humble Creek. Things were a lot simpler before you came upon me that day on the road," Isaac said. Their hands were still touching and neither one of them moved. "Maybe you should have shot me dead that day," Isaac joked.

"You couldn't be more wrong, Isaac. I feel safe knowing you're looking out for me – for us I mean. Thomas will come around and Uncle John will calm down. It's all going to work out – I can feel it in my bones."

"Always so positive. It keeps me going, Abigail and I can't afford to get down right now. If I show weakness, George Bail will sense it from a mile away." Isaac stood up and stretched. "I have to get back to work while the farm is still mine. I love that place and to be honest it doesn't feel like work."

"Let me know what I need to do. I'll keep things together here at Hopewell and let you know if I see anything suspicious," Abigail said.

As Isaac walked away, Abigail's feeling of longing set in immediately. She watched him until he passed the Magnolia trees. Abigail's eyes followed Isaac until he faded from sight and she

realized she did feel safe. Despite the chaos, Isaac Curry made her feel safer than she'd ever felt. The fact became clear – if Isaac were to leave, Abigail wouldn't get over it. She wouldn't just be temporarily sad, but forever devastated that he wasn't in her life.

Abigail thought she was looking for a man like her father Ezra Anders. She was wrong because the only man Abigail wanted in her life was Isaac Curry. As soon as Abigail admitted her feelings to herself, she began to question them.

Could she really feel that way about a man who was a stranger not long ago. It was like something out of a book. Was there a chance that Isaac was having similar feelings. She could have questioned her feelings all day long, but Uncle John called.

“Abigail, I need your help with the cattle because Thomas has checked out again,” John said.

Abigail wasn't surprised Thomas reacted so badly. He had only just come to terms with his past and now it was coming back. The circumstances were different but to him it was the same. She'd never forgive herself if she caused Thomas to go back to his dark place and never come out. Maybe he should not have been invited to the family meeting. It might have been better to bring Thomas along slowly.

Abigail patted her mother's shoulder. The older woman was still sitting at the kitchen table, staring at her hands. The Anders family was in the midst of turmoil again and Abigail had to find a way out.

Chapter 24

One sleepless night couldn't follow another. Isaac could hardly keep his eyes open after completing his evening chores. He picked beans and squash from the garden that filled several crates. The next step was canning, and Isaac had no idea how to do that. He was forced to ask Abigail yet another favor.

When Abigail wasn't around, Isaac thought of her a lot, then it became an hourly pastime and now he thought of her every minute. When he slept, Abigail found her way into his dreams. Did she think of him too? If she did, it couldn't be half as often as he thought about her.

Isaac stumbled into bed and pulled the covers tight. He was dreaming and Abigail was in his reverie. Things were peaceful but suddenly turned loud and dangerous. It was a dream that Isaac was unable to wake from, as hard as he struggled.

It didn't take long for Isaac to realize that he wasn't dreaming. The noise in his dream was actually the chickens. Isaac looked out the window and saw the moon high in the sky. It was the middle of the night and the chickens were going wild – wilder than they were in the morning when they called for food.

Isaac dressed in minutes and rushed towards the coop. He expected

a fox or coyote had made their way in and successfully gobbled up a few chickens. Isaac was lucky this was the first time such an attack occurred. As he got closer, Isaac heard voices and laughter – sinister laughter. There was no fox and no coyote – humans had broken into his coop.

Isaac pushed open the coop door with his rifle in hand. It was too late because every chicken had been killed. Isaac saw all the blood and he was momentarily transported back to the battlefield. It was the only time he'd witnessed a scene so gruesome.

There wasn't a chicken alive and the men who caused the destruction had fled. Isaac looked out the doorway and saw only the backs of men on horseback. One man stayed back long enough to turn, wave, and tip his hat. It was George Bail. The battle that Isaac was hesitant to fight had started.

Isaac spewed a few expletives because he was alone. He'd never let immoral words come from his mouth in the presence of Abigail. The fact that she wasn't there to see the dead chickens was a blessing.

Isaac had seen death and the sight wasn't something that was easily forgotten. The best Isaac could do was clean it up before Abigail came upon the mess the next morning.

Isaac walked to the pump and started filling buckets. It reminded him of the day he and Abigail filled buckets at the pump. Those were simpler times and Isaac wondered if they'd ever return.

What a way to send a signal that he was serious – George and his scoundrel friends were vicious. Isaac began loading chicken parts in the wheelbarrow and getting rid of the blood soaked hay. He made numerous trips far-afield so he could dispose of the evidence

and Abigail would never have to see it.

It would be like Christmas morning for the buzzards and vultures. Isaac figured all creatures had to eat and unlike war, in the animal world, every creature benefitted from the death of another. After the buzzards had their meal, the worms would take over.

Isaac was shoveling the last of what was left of his flock when he heard a familiar cluck. Annabelle appeared behind him unharmed and looking for food as always. Isaac laughed.

“You must have escaped the coop again and just in the nick of time. You’re a strange bird. I’ll get you new friends or maybe find you a new home on a farm that’s much safer.” Isaac picked up hay from the barn and made Annabelle a bed in the potting shed. She seemed perfectly happy to have her own quarters.

As Isaac was finished throwing water on all of the surfaces and removing any evidence of the mess, he took a rest on the bench under the willow tree. Isaac couldn’t help but fall asleep because his last two nights were sleepless.

He dreamed of Abigail and could smell her lavender. He dreamed that she brought breakfast when Isaac fell off the bench and realized it wasn’t a dream at all.

“Hello, there. I thought you’d be sleeping late this morning, but I figured you’d be in bed and not under the willow tree,” Abigail said. She wore her yellow dress that was Isaac’s favorite. It was hard not to smile when she wore it. Isaac suspected Abigail knew it because she was aware Isaac needed cheer in his life.

Abigail opened her basket to reveal corn muffins, bacon and boiled eggs. Isaac started on the muffins and meat immediately. He

decided to skip the eggs for now.

“Did the ruckus I heard coming from here keep you awake?” Abigail asked. She shot Isaac a knowing glance.

Isaac sighed deeply. “It was George and his men. They got to my chickens and killed every one of them. Except Annabelle – that bird is a survivor.”

“Are you sure it was George and not a coyote. We had them take most of our chickens last year. I had to build a new door that was critter-proof.”

“I wish it was, but I saw them ride away. George had the nerve to turn and tip his hat in my direction. I was holding my rifle and could have taken him out, but I didn’t. The dozen men he had with him would have pumped me full of bullets. I don’t think he’ll stop until he takes everything from me.” Isaac looked down.

“Oh, it must have been awful. I know how proud you were of your flock.” Abigail picked the eggs out of her basket and slipped them into her apron pocket. “Did you have an episode when you saw all the blood?” Abigail asked. She knew it might have brought back memories of the war.

“I was disturbed but I didn’t react by having an episode. I don’t know if I could take that sort of thing if people were involved. And if I can’t, I know Thomas would fall apart in such a situation. How is Thomas by the way?” Isaac asked.

“He was up early and did his chores. He managed to have breakfast with the family but didn’t say much. He doesn’t want anything to do with fighting because it’s already taken away so much of his life,” Abigail said as she looked off into the distance.

“I don’t want that either Abigail. I know I have to defend my land and Hopewell farm too, but I don’t want to fight. When will it stop, Abigail?” Isaac asked, then noticed that Abigail was staring at something. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ignore what you were saying. We should take a ride up the hill. It’s your land and one of the reasons Magnolia Hill Farm will make a perfect base for George. I imagine you have a great view – let’s take a look,” Abigail suggested.

“Are you challenging me to a race, Abigail?” Isaac asked.

“I wasn’t, but now that you mention it, sure. Nutmeg could use the exercise and I bet Dandelion could as well.”

Abigail and Isaac went up the hill to a seldom used part of Isaac’s farm. The hill rose gradually, and it gave a grand view of the entire town of Humble Creek.

They ended up talking while they rode and forgot that they agreed to a race. Isaac admitted that it would make a perfect fortress because enemies could be seen coming from all directions. The only thing was that they weren’t at war, at least as far as Isaac was concerned.

For a moment Isaac was able to forget about everything because he was with Abigail. She had a way of making everything else in life fade away – all the bad stuff. I

n the bright sunlight her freckles became prominent and it was easy to see what an adorable child she had probably been. Abigail mentioned that her freckles bothered her, but Isaac thought she was cute as a button.

“Do you know what I think?” Abigail asked.

“What’s that?” Isaac asked. He could see thoughts swirling around her mind.

“The original owners of this land had it all wrong. This is where the home should have been built. The view makes it perfect.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Abigail, when I build a new house.” Isaac laughed.

“Don’t laugh. It doesn’t hurt to dream. The best things come from big dreams,” Abigail said.

Isaac did have dreams and they all involved Abigail, but he didn’t have the confidence to tell her. He was facing down an enemy, who needed all his attention.

For hours Isaac and Abigail talked of nothing in particular as they sat atop the hill. It turned out to be just what Isaac needed – an escape. An escape that wouldn’t be possible without Abigail Anders.

“My stomach is growling, which means we’ve been up here for a while. Time has flown by like a bird in flight,” Isaac commented.

“So it has. My plan worked.” Abigail said as she brushed her hands together as if she had just completed a job.

Isaac smiled. “You had a plan in bringing me up this hill?”

“Yes, you needed to get away and forget about your problems if only for a short time. There wasn’t anything you could do about the chickens and I knew you wouldn’t stop thinking about it. You

needed a change of scenery, Isaac.”

“Smart woman. It worked and now I have another favor to ask you, if you’re game.” Isaac winked. Abigail nodded that she was ready for Isaac’s request. “I need help canning the vegetables from my abundant garden. I’m desperate. I don’t want to waste any of the produce.”

“I’ll happily help you Isaac.”

“And you can keep some of the jars,” he insisted.

“Ma will be glad to have extra,” Abigail agreed.

Abigail and Isaac rode back to the house, bringing the produce into the kitchen, where she walked Isaac through the steps of canning. It took them most of the day but they got it all put up.

“Today was so enjoyable,” Isaac said as he continued to shell peas in the afternoon. “This is how I want every day to be. There is a lot of pleasure to be had simply living on this farm. From the time I wake up at dawn, I’m busy and there’s nothing about it I don’t like. Shoveling manure may bother some but I don’t mind. There’s nothing like digging my hands in the dry earth or getting caught in a rainstorm. I don’t want to lose the farm, but I don’t want anymore bloodshed. I find myself so confused, Abigail and I don’t see a way out.”

Abigail grabbed Isaac’s arm and caught his gaze. She looked directly in his eyes when she spoke. “I’m here and we’ll figure it out.”

Abigail left and Isaac finished cleaning up and then walked along the front of his property. He passed the Magnolia Hill Farm sign

under the shade of the sweet smelling trees. He knew George was somewhere out there but too clever to be seen. Isaac didn't know if he'd ever sleep while George was still roaming around.

Waiting until his enemy made his next move was unsettling and he hoped it didn't involve bringing harm to Abigail. Isaac knew, if given the choice he'd choose her safety over his own, but it wasn't his decision. If George knew what was in Isaac's heart he might lash out at her like he did the chickens. The thought made Isaac shudder.

Chapter 25

Abigail put off telling Uncle John about what happened with Isaac's chickens until Thomas retired to his room. She was hesitant to draw Thomas too far into the situation.

After his reaction when Isaac told him about George, she knew it was best to keep quiet. John wasn't surprised when he heard about the flock being killed. It was the type of thing an outlaw gang did to send a clear message to the enemy.

"I'm going to help Thomas with the morning chores tomorrow. I know he can do the work but I'm curious about how he's doing. He'll talk to me alone more readily than he would with everyone at the breakfast table," Abigail said to Uncle John.

He was working on the ledger; figuring out how much he could afford to pay hands. The crops were almost ready to harvest and there was more work than Thomas, John, Abigail and Leo could do. John had a system of figuring just how many man hours were necessary.

He was brimming with pride because this was going to be the most profitable harvest in years. It was coming at just the right time and would make the farm profitable again.

“You’d better get your rest, Abigail. The first thing you and Thomas need to do is move the cattle away from the crops. It’ll make harvesting easier,” John said.

“Will do. Isaac will come and help harvest, so you can count him in if you want, though I doubt he would take payment,” Abigail said. Picking crops with Isaac nearby would make the job less tedious – Abigail thought to herself.

Barely awake herself the next morning, Abigail banged on Thomas’s bedroom door. “Time for chores, Thomas. I thought we’d work faster and have a more pleasant time if we worked together,” Abigail said.

She could hear Thomas climbing out of bed and dressing. He opened his door as he put on his hat. He had gained at least ten pounds since eating more and building muscle. “Abigail, come on? You just want to check up on me and make sure I’m not going to explode. I’ll admit, violence scares me, but you and Isaac helped me. And going back to that dark place isn’t going to happen.”

“Okay,” Abigail said. Thomas smiled and she almost believed that he was alright.

“Let’s go get this done so we can put our feet up. In a few days, we’ll begin the toughest time of the year on the farm,” Thomas said.

“It’ll be good for me because it will keep me from thinking about – well, you know.” Abigail thought it was best that they do not talk too much about George and the outlaws, unless necessary.

Brother and sister chatted as they walked over the meadow before the barn came into view. Behind it were the neat rows of mature crops of corn, wheat and barley. They raced to the barn after passing the garden which they had been doing since they were kids. Thomas won the race and he stood still when he arrived at the field.

“What are you doing, Thomas, I’m used to seeing you jump up and down in celebration of your victory.” Abigail stood next to her brother and grasped his hand that hung at his side. What she saw was acres of destroyed crops. Some were trampled by horses – probably dragging a rake of some sort. Others were slashed to the ground. A tar-like mixture was poured over the field. Nothing had survived.

Abigail and Thomas were slack jawed as they looked at the future of Hopewell farm ruined. Abigail felt tears running down her face and she lacked the strength to reach up and brush them away. Abigail was numb and unable to open her mouth and say how she felt. She couldn’t move or communicate.

She felt the way Thomas and Isaac had described they felt when having an episode - a rush of emotion like a cyclone. Abigail asked herself – is this what war felt like? Then she chided herself for being so silly. War was nothing like this. But this was pretty bad.

“Abigail, how could we not have heard our crops being destroyed? You crack open your window at night,” Thomas asked.

“The wind was blowing, dogs barking, wolves howling. There are so many sounds on the farm at night. The outlaws didn’t want us to hear and kept their voices low,” Abigail said in a monotone voice.

“I’ve never seen you like this. Should I be worried?”

“This is terrible. We might go bankrupt and the outlaws are responsible. They aren’t just after Isaac – they are after us as well and I don’t think they’ll stop. Those scoundrels aren’t going to stop until they’ve ground us to shreds. I’ve never felt this hopeless, Thomas. Our life on Hopewell Farm is over,” Abigail said as she fell to her knees. Her drab-green dress was covered in dirt as she pounded the ground.

Thomas started to shudder, and a vacant look took over his eyes. Abigail feared that she was too negative. Thomas always relied on Abigail to be the strong one and lift him up. Thomas shook his head as if he were trying to keep the trauma of war out of his mind.

“This is a lot to deal with alone,” Thomas said.

“I shouldn’t have said those things – it was the moment I was in. I do know one thing for sure – I need you to be strong for me because I can’t do this alone. You can’t heal when you’re looking at this destruction. Go inside and rest and we’ll come up with a plan later. You’ll help me most by taking care of yourself.”

As soon as Abigail finished, Thomas ran off. Abigail was alone and she could cry as loud as she wanted. She didn’t know how devastated Isaac was when he realized Magnolia Hill Farm was at risk. Now she knew exactly how he felt, and it was horrible.

Abigail could only imagine how Isaac was going to feel when he saw her family’s crops destroyed. He was going to blame himself because that’s the kind of man Isaac was. Abigail looked out at black tar as far as the eye could see – there was nothing left alive.

For years the land would be no good for planting, which was just what the scoundrels wanted. If farmers weren't able to make a living in Humble Creek they'd leave, and the land would fall into the hands of the criminals.

Abigail felt a hand on her shoulder, so she turned, assuming Thomas was back. "Isaac," Abigail said with a note of astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Thomas came to get me while he had tar on his hands and tears in his eyes. When I saw him, I thought the worst – that he had fallen deep into an episode. That's when I realized he didn't come for himself but you. He was worried about you and your brother cares a great deal. He's come a long way and he's stronger than you think." Isaac extended both his hands and helped Abigail off the ground.

"Words cannot express how sorry I am, Abigail. I never should have accepted your help and I should have gone back to Boston after the first day in Humble Creek. Signs were everywhere, like the rude townsfolk and the condition of the farm but then I met you. For the first time since the war, I had a glimmer of hope in my life but now I see me staying has put you in danger. George Bail was behind this for sure and his actions are getting worse – what's next? I fear he's going to physically harm someone I care about."

"Uncle John doesn't know yet, but he will soon. He's going to run to George Bail and strangle him with his bare hands," Abigail said. She felt her face and realized what a sight she was. A mixture of dirt and tar were everywhere, and crying had made her puffy.

"That would be a bad idea. We have to convince John not to do that before he runs off and does something stupid," Isaac said.

“Hopeless is what I am Isaac. For the first time in my twenty-one years, I have nowhere to turn. Nothing is going to bring this land back and everything is dead. Living in a city is not for me – I wouldn’t know how to be.”

Isaac grasped Abigail’s hand and together they looked at the destruction. Cattle were unharmed in the distance but much of their grazing land was turned black. They could be moved to a greener pasture but the hay and grain for the other animals was destroyed. How would they survive? Abigail’s eyes scanned the field for something positive to hold onto. Anything would do; she closed her eyes while she and Isaac stood quietly.

Abigail ripped her hand free and went running across the destroyed crops. “Green, green. Life rises up amidst the destruction. They can beat me down, but I won’t stay down for long.” Abigail collapsed onto her hands and knees as she carefully put her head down next to the ground.

“Look,” she whispered as he came up to her. “A shoot. Still growing.”

She got to her feet and Isaac embraced Abigail in pure joy.

“George and his outlaw gang can keep trying but they always seem to leave a smidgen of hope behind. There was Annabelle the chicken and now this tiny shoot of green. They have no idea what I can do with a dash of hope,” Abigail said as she brushed away tears of joy.

Abigail and Isaac walked back to the house to share the news of the crops being destroyed with Uncle John. Isaac cautioned Abigail about not making a big deal about finding green among the destruction.

John wouldn't see it like Abigail and he would be too angry to care. They both agreed to keep an eye out for Thomas because the trauma of war was closer than ever to him. If things got bad, Isaac would talk him down to reality.

They walked into the kitchen and found John working numbers and Jane preparing breakfast. "What happened to you, Abigail?" John asked. "Where's Thomas and what's Isaac doing here? What has happened at Magnolia Hill Farm?" John was full of questions.

Abigail was going to answer everyone. "I'm covered with tar and dirt and Thomas is resting in his room. Nothing happened at Isaac's farm but instead it happened here. Our crops have been destroyed. Honeywell Farm has been attacked by the outlaws."

Uncle John crumbled his paper and flipped the kitchen table. Jane cried out and Abigail stepped back. Uncle John ran to the back porch, which looked out on the land where the crops once grew. His rifle was propped up against the side of the house. He cocked it and shot several bullets into the air. Uncle George's face was grimmer than Abigail had ever seen it.

"We're done doing it your way." John pointed at Isaac. "I'm not blaming you, but I do think you owe it to Humble Creek to fight for our town. The outlaws are killing the last of the productive farms and our way of life is at risk. You can't just sit on your hands any longer. We need a plan to fight back and we need it now."

"I want to preserve our way of life as much as you do, sir. But fighting against an armed gang won't get us anywhere but dead. We need a plan, as you said, but a smart one," Isaac said, respectfully. He didn't want to further enrage John Anders. Considering his size, it would be a bad idea.

“This can’t be done alone. We need every able-bodied citizen of Humble Creek on our side. Will you join me on a ride into town?” Abigail asked as she looked at Isaac.

“I’ll get Dandy saddled-up and we’ll go,” Isaac said.

First, Abigail would soak in a warm bath to wash off the soot and tar. Then they would go rustle up a posse to defend their town.

Chapters 26

Dandelion and Nutmeg were as comfortable together as Isaac and Abigail. When Abigail arrived and tied Nutmeg to a hitching post in front of Isaac's house, she complained until she was moved closer to Dandy.

Isaac was sitting on the front porch when Abigail arrived. She had bathed and was as clean as a whistle now. Isaac could smell lavender as she approached.

"Have things calmed down at home?" Isaac asked.

"Somewhat. Uncle John wanted to accompany us into town, but I convinced him that someone had to stay behind, in case the criminals came back," Abigail said as she sat on the porch swing.

"Good idea. I don't want John to scare folks away because they may not know how bad the outlaw situation is yet." Isaac thought that because of his connection to George Bail, they had it worse than anyone else in Humble Creek.

"Abner and Leo went into town this morning and promised to gather as many farmers as they could. They have both worked at a few different farms, so they know people. I'll introduce you and then you can describe what's been happening," Abigail said.

“Sounds good. I’m sure there’ll be plenty of questions,”

“You’ll do great. I think you’re believable,” Abigail said cheerfully.

Isaac shook his head. “To most, I’m an outsider and I’ll have to gain their respect.” Isaac put on his hat and they made their way into town.

Isaac and Abigail rode side-by-side into town. For the two of them, they were very quiet. Since they met, they were never at a loss for words. Isaac Curry never set out to be a major in the Union Army, but that role was thrust upon him. Isaac witnessed his own major killed and he was asked right away to lead a company of 100 men.

Leadership skills were not easy for a kid who was never in charge of any men. His brother Ladd, as the eldest, had more experience because he was used to ordering around his brothers. Isaac had no option but to learn and he did. It was those skills he had to call on to get the folks of Humble Creek to work with him.

Isaac learned early on that no two men were alike and different ways of talking worked better on some soldiers than others. There was an eighteen year old boy who had never been away from home. He had to be handled gently.

Isaac was in charge of another soldier who was a boy from a large family in the mountains. He was tough, so Isaac treated him that way. Isaac learned that he had to pay attention to the men he was talking to. Their faces would tell Isaac how to treat them.

“You’re lost in thought, Isaac. Anything in particular on your mind?” Abigail asked.

“I’m getting ready, is all. It’s not every day I talk to a crowd. I’ve

gotten so used to talking to you Abigail, which is easy. I don't expect these folks to be so pleasing. They ain't going to like what I have to say," Isaac said.

"The truth isn't always easy to hear, but it's necessary." Abigail pulled Nutmeg up in front of the general store. The town meeting would be held in the pasture behind the store.

Isaac and Abigail walked up the steps to the store and they were met by Mrs. Landell. The last time she saw Isaac was the day of the dust up in the saloon. The day Isaac had a terrible episode and almost ruined things with Abigail.

"Glad you're here," the authoritative Mrs. Landell said. "Leo and Abner gathered about a crowd of folks who are interested in what you have to say, Isaac. Abner tells me you had trouble out at Magnolia Hill with your flock. I was wondering why you weren't bringing eggs my way. I was coming to depend on your supply but I'm sure the outlaws figured as much." A woman appeared behind Mrs. Landell. She was a raven-haired beauty with blue eyes. "Isaac, this is my girl, Martha."

"Pleasure to meet you. Howdy, Abigail."

"Good to see you, Martha."

"Do me a kindness and tell your brother I say hello."

"I will, Martha," Abigail said. The woman gave one firm nod before disappearing into the back room once more.

Isaac recognized the name. She was the girl Thomas was sweet on before the war. Isaac was pleased they'd have a bit of good news to bring back to Thomas.

Isaac stood on a tree stump behind the general store. He started to tell the story of the recent outlaw attacks on Magnolia Hill and Hopewell, leaving out the connection he had with George Bail.

The people of Humble Creek would turn on him if they thought Isaac was responsible for bringing the outlaw gang to town. It was a coincidence, but they might not see it that way.

It became obvious real quick that the town's folk had something to add. "If you could introduce yourself to me before you get talking. I know some of you but not all," Isaac said.

"I'm Ed Parnell and I own a sheep farm near the river's bend. I also have or had a few acres of corn. My barn and crops went up in flames and I lost most of my herd. I'm left with a dozen sheep and a garden that's barely enough to feed my family."

"I'm Joe Gruber. I had one hundred head of cattle that disappeared off my property while I was at a cattleman's meeting two counties over. I was setting a price for my herd and I was looking to make a pretty penny. I wanted to reduce my herd but not by that much," Joe joked. "I'm not alone when I say I'm leaving Humble Creek. I've got nothing left."

Isaac was stunned that he was not alone. Almost everyone who showed up that day had at least a portion of their farm destroyed.

"I'm nervous because my husband Chester Johnson did all the talking for us. But he died. His heart broke after them outlaws stole every one of the horses from our ranch. I live off the kindness of others now. I'm Fern Johnson by the way." The frail elderly woman looked as if a strong gust of wind would knock her down.

Isaac looked at Abigail with despair. Neither of them had any idea that the criminals had been so busy. They were a scared group and most of them weren't looking to arm themselves with guns because that would make them just as bad as the outlaws.

Isaac was happy to hear that most of the people in Humble Creek wanted to stop the violence instead of add to it. Most of them wanted peace but none of them had a plan for achieving it.

Mr. Landell shared his theory with the gathered farmers, and he was probably right. "You've had a look at the outlaws as they've come through town. They sure ain't farmers or ranchers. Most of them couldn't plant a seed if their lives depended on it. They've made it clear that they don't want your chickens, Isaac. The scoundrels killed them instead of stealing them. All they want is power and being wealthy is the way to get that done. All the hardworking people will be forced to move elsewhere, and the outlaws will be left with land, money and power. That's all they care about and they almost have it all," Mr. Landell said as he threw his hands up in the air.

Isaac looked across the field and he saw the man who might be able to help. He wore a shiny badge on his chest and Isaac figured he was probably the sheriff. Isaac approached him when folks started talking among themselves. "Hello, I'm guessing you're the sheriff here in Humble Creek. What do you think of all this?" Isaac asked.

"I'm Bill Fisk and I'm the lawman here in Humble Creek. How'd you tell?" He jokingly asked. His badge was displayed prominently. He was an average sized man with shaggy hair and a handlebar mustache. "I didn't know the outlaw problem was as bad as it is until I heard from everyone today. I think folks were too scared to air their grievances."

“Now that you know – it would help if you kept an eye out for any law breaking. We need to make sure the outlaws don’t get too comfortable in Humble Creek. With everyone in town working together, we can show the scoundrels we are standing our ground. I’ll keep in touch, Bill and you do the same,” Isaac said. He was feeling better already as a part of the Humble Creek family. If they presented a united front against crime, it would help.

As Isaac walked to Dandy and prepared to head home, he noticed a few men talking among themselves. Abigail hadn’t introduced them, and they weren’t talking to anyone Isaac knew. One of the men had tar on his boot and he wasn’t as tan on the face as a farmer would be. Farmers spent hours under the beaming sun and it was tough to not get tan.

“Howdy. Don’t think we’ve met. What farm do you work at?” Isaac asked.

“We’re just passing through. Wondered what all the folks were talking about.”

Isaac saw the other two men feel for their guns – making sure they were ready to draw if necessary. “You boys might do me a favor.”

“What’s that, Isaac?” The man doing the talking asked.

Isaac laughed. “You boys weren’t here when I introduced myself – How’d you know my name?” Isaac saw the men getting nervous. “It’s okay boys. Go back to George and tell him I said hello. The folks in this town are not scared by his tactics. We were here before you and we’ll be here long after you’re gone. Now git.” Isaac said.

The men ran off to the saloon where George was probably in a

dark corner sipping whiskey.

Riding on the way home from town next to Abigail was peaceful. It felt good knowing the entire town, including the sheriff, was on their side. There was always something to see on the mountain ledges as they passed. Abigail grew up with the Sierra Nevada Mountains nearby, but they were still new to Isaac. On a few occasions, he saw mountain goats and big horned sheep.

Isaac was sure there were more mountain lions than he could count, prowling throughout the jagged peaks. George Bail and his men probably had a hideout somewhere in the caves. They were just waiting to swoop down and take his farm and all the rest like it.

“I see you looking longingly at the mountains. I know of some beautiful trails that take us deep into the forest and hidden pools. When this outlaw mess is settled we can take a ride if you’re interested,” Abigail suggested.

“I’d like that. I cannot believe you’d want anything to do with me after the danger that I’ve brought to Humble Creek. I don’t deserve your kindness,” Isaac said. The breeze was blowing her sweet lavender scent his way. Paired with the sunlight making her green eyes glow, Isaac was mesmerized.

Abigail giggled. “Will you stop. I’m grateful that you stayed, Isaac. Despite all the madness, I’ve enjoyed my time with you. The madness would have made its way to Hopewell Farm eventually but with you here, at least I feel safe.”

“I stay awake at night blaming myself for the hardship and sorrow

I've brought to your family," Isaac said. He was confused how he could be so happy while the world around him was in danger.

"Phooey, I place no blame on you and neither does my family. You're a good friend to the Anders clan, especially Thomas. Without you, he'd still be shuttered up in his room and afraid of his own shadow. I would have died from exhaustion by doing his chores every day along with mine. The war took so much from you, Isaac but it didn't take your kind heart, if possible it made it kinder. You give without being asked and consider every one's feelings over your own. You're the opposite of George Bail. Your heart blossomed, while his shriveled up and died. Humble Creek is lucky to have you, Isaac and I'm the luckiest," Abigail said. She tilted her head towards the sun.

Isaac's heart skipped a beat when Abigail spoke. He thought the day he met Abigail was one of the best in his life. Now Isaac knew it was the very best. They continued down the twisty road with the golden glow of the setting sun upon them.

Chapter 27

Abigail arrived home just as Jane was cleaning up after dinner. “You missed dinner, Abigail but I saved you a plate if you’re interested,” Jane offered.

“No thank you, Ma. Save it for tomorrow and I’ll put it in a pail for lunch. Uncle John and I have some cattle to move and we’ll be out in the field all day. The outlaws destroyed our crops but we still have the herd,” Abigail said optimistically. Despite everything horrible that happened in the day, she was cheerful. Isaac Curry was a big part of that; he made the bad stuff easier to take.

“Suit yourself, just be sure the food doesn’t go to waste. We have to cut back where we can if we are to keep from losing the farm,” Jane said. “Abigail, you have a familiar look about you that I’ve seen before.”

“It must be my tired look. Can you think of a more chaotic day?” Abigail asked.

“No, Abigail.” Jane smiled. “I only saw the look one other time and it wasn’t on you but me. It’s the way I looked when I was falling for your father. I bet you’re weak in the knees and thinking about Isaac more than you even want to. You can’t help it and I remember it well.” Jane winked.

Abigail was taken aback. She didn't know her growing feelings for Isaac were so obvious. She wondered if it was something Isaac picked up on as well. "Any feelings I have will have to wait, Ma."

"I guess we do have a calamity on our hands that takes precedence," Jane said.

"Keep saying your prayers, Ma." Abigail believed that the prayers were helpful to the cause. However, they mattered more to Jane because they gave her solace and the feeling that she had an important role. God had always been an important part of Jane's life and Abigail wanted to someday re-commit herself to the church. At the present, bedtime prayers were all Abigail offered.

Abigail kissed her mother on the cheek and scurried off to her room. She looked forward to a quiet night's sleep. Abigail figured the outlaws had to get shut-eye and couldn't pillage all night long.

Abigail pulled her quilt tight over her head and before she knew was fast asleep. Her window was always left open a crack because she loved the gentle breeze even when it was chilly.

Before she could dream a clatter erupted on the farm, accompanied with loud whoops and hollers. Her first thought was that a cattle drive was moving through, but it was not the time of year for that to occur.

Abigail stepped into her green dress and lit her lantern. She crept past Thomas's door because there was no use waking him until she knew what was happening. Within minutes she was standing on the porch with Uncle John.

They were witnessing the unthinkable as their cattle were being rustled off their land. Fences had been cut or trampled so nothing

stood in their way. The cattle were like pets to Uncle John, so his heart was breaking.

There were dozens of wranglers and as many dogs who were taking away Hopewell farm's value and there was little that could be done. Uncle John knew he had to at least try and stop the outlaws; it wasn't in his nature to do nothing.

"Thomas, get down here and bring your gun. Put that holster around your waist and make sure it's full of bullets. The time for resisting is over," John yelled up towards Thomas's window. His lantern was lit and Abigail heard activity in her brother's room.

While waiting for Thomas, Abigail looked at Isaac's farm and saw his cattle being rustled too. His lantern was lit and she didn't doubt Isaac would be on Dandy's back. He wouldn't like it but wouldn't hesitate defending what was his. Thomas appeared on the porch with a look of fear in his eyes and his hand shaking as he held his rifle.

Abigail knew he wasn't capable of doing what Uncle John asked. She grabbed the rifle from his hand and the holster from his waist. Abigail pushed Thomas back through the door and raced with Uncle John to the barn where they mounted their horses. Leo was there to help with the gear and had loaded guns waiting for them.

John looked at Abigail before they charged from the barn. "There's no time to argue Abigail but Thomas should be next to me and not you."

Abigail shrugged her shoulders. "Let's go." Abigail didn't have time to place a bonnet on her head so her long golden braid was trailing behind her. She found herself glancing at Isaac's farm but realized he would take care of himself. She had a job to do herself.

It was what her father told her might happen someday, so he had prepared her. Abigail knew how to ride fast and shoot a gun while doing it. There were times her father was telling her about the need to learn to defend the farm that she had balked. Now, Abigail was happy she had learned.

Guns were blazing and it was difficult to see with the dust stirred up by the horses and gun smoke. Through it all, Abigail saw the red scarf worn by George Bail and his distinctive mustache.

A bullet passed by her cheek, so close that she felt it pass. It grazed the tiny hairs on her cheek. George himself had fired the shot; he looked back with his black eyes and recognized her immediately. He must have been shocked that a woman was keeping up with him. Uncle John rode past Abigail, ready to defend his niece. He drew his gun from his holster and extended his arm.

He shot for George's head and missed, so George shot back but missed. They went back and forth before John fell to the ground because of a misstep by his horse. He laid there, stunned as his horse ran off.

Abigail found herself alone, but the chase was still underway. Abigail was exposed and the scoundrels were not going to allow themselves to be beat by a woman. They continued to fire, and Abigail was in the line of fire.

By chance they turned up towards the mountains with the sharp turns and drop offs. Abigail was confident she knew the terrain better because it was where she grew up. She was worried about being outnumbered when she saw a familiar horse and an even more familiar man on its back.

It was Isaac on Dandy. Through the unbearably loud sounds,

Abigail heard Isaac calling her name. It gave her a small amount of hope amidst the chaos surrounding her.

Abigail was boxed in with George ahead of her and three outlaws behind her. The men behind her were continuously shooting bullets in Abigail's direction, which had miraculously missed.

She kept disappearing behind the tight turns and the bullets ricocheted off the sheer cliff walls. Isaac confused the men when he came up behind them and took some of the heat off Abigail. She continued charging towards George who was quite a horseman himself.

One of the men behind Abigail and in front of Isaac fell from his horse into a deep ravine. He wasn't expecting the drop-off after a sharp turn. The others gained on Abigail and two more scoundrels appeared. Their hideout must have been close by and soon they'd have no shortage of reserves.

Panic set in and Abigail was low on bullets. Her only chance was to duck into a cave unnoticed because even with Isaac's help it was hopeless. She wouldn't make it out alive without some cleverness. As good as she was, she couldn't outgun half a dozen men.

Abigail was about to duck into the cave when she thought of a better idea. She started to have second thoughts about going into a cavern. If she was discovered by even one man with a fully loaded gun, she'd be caught defenseless with no way out.

Abigail pulled up on Nutmeg and rode back to where John had fallen. There were plenty of times Uncle John picked up Abigail when she fell. It was time to return the favor.

She saw Isaac's red scarf whiz by in a cloud of dust; he must have

identified his distinctive cattle brand and was going after them. Guns were still firing rapidly. No one knew who was shooting who – it was complete chaos.

Abigail used the madness to her advantage when she managed to hop off Nutmeg for a moment.

“What are you doing, Abigail. I’m aiming to crawl under the brush and lay still until this mayhem passes. Get back in the saddle and move. I stand a better chance by myself – a smaller target,” John howled over the deafening sound of gunfire.

“Fine,” she shouted back.

Abigail raised her arm to brush aside a hair and a bullet grazed her arm. The blood trickled down her side and stung in the worst way but the pain soon subsided. Abigail ripped off a piece of her dress and turned back the way she’d come.

She followed the direction of her cattle, not realizing that she would be more outnumbered than before. Abigail started to think she would have been better off crawling under the bush with John. One good thing came out of stopping for John. Abigail grabbed his gun, leaving him with his rifle so he could still defend himself.

Abigail was beginning to shoot as if she’d never held a gun, her hand was so tired. George showed up in the pack that was running away with her cattle. He seemed determined to not allow Abigail to get the best of him. She was weary and distressed.

Abigail knew they were heading for uncharted territory where there were no farms or ranches for miles. She was getting herself into a situation which would be very difficult to get out of, but she couldn’t let them get away with their cattle.

And yet, if she did this, no one was going to save her. She would have to save herself.

Chapter 28

Isaac's cattle were fading from sight. He lost his chickens and now his cattle were gone too. George and his men were taking Isaac's farm away from him one thing at a time.

They wouldn't stop until they left Isaac with nothing. Isaac ran under a hanging branch that nearly knocked him off his horse.

Abigail was always talking about signs; Isaac took that to mean he had better change course and save what he could – Abigail and her cattle. Before turning back, Isaac watched the last of his herd disappear from sight.

Isaac called out to the wranglers. "You think you've won but I'll succeed. I'm more than my cattle, chickens or anything else you take from me. I started with nothing, so this is nothing new to me."

Isaac knew Abigail would be following her cattle and he turned Dandy in that direction. Isaac knew the dangers of thinking about the past, it was what he cautioned Thomas against doing. Isaac found it impossible because everything reminded him of the war.

There was a time early in the war when he was separated from his company in unfamiliar territory. He was patrolling the perimeter of a base near Virginia and lost his way. A Confederate soldier

appeared who had seen way too much blood shed. His eyes were wild and he was probably a deserter.

The man pointed his revolver at Isaac's head and pulled the trigger, but by sheer luck, the gun jammed. The memory of that day made Isaac wince. From that day on he thought that he wasn't killed for a reason. Maybe it was so on this day he could rescue Abigail Anders.

Isaac barreled ahead and eventually saw Abigail's long braid cutting through the wind like a knife. The sun was just beginning to come up over the horizon, which meant they had been going for at least a couple of hours. As Isaac coursed through the dry fields, he felt the first drop of rain.

He sighed and really didn't know if that was a good thing or bad thing because he had never run Dandy in the mud. At this point he and Dandy were bonded, and the animal performed when Isaac needed him most.

Isaac was confident that he and Dandy were connected but he'd never be able to compete with the way his horse loved Nutmeg.

Dandy raced towards Nutmeg faster than a bullet leaves a gun. Abigail looked with amazement when Isaac pulled alongside her. She was chasing George while he was wrangling her cattle and no idea Isaac was so close.

"I've got this Isaac. If I can outrun George, I'll be able to divert some of my cattle home. I'm gaining on the scoundrel," Abigail spoke loudly so her words would make it through the thunderous rumbling of hooves.

"No way am I letting you get more involved than you already are,

Abigail. I've lost my herd and I'm not about to let anything bad happen to you."

Abigail protested but Isaac's mind was made up. He pulled ahead of her and brought Dandy in stride with George Bail. It felt like their days in North Carolina; two majors on opposing sides fighting head to head.

"Time to pull back George. You got what you really wanted which was my cattle. They've already been driven God knows where. It doesn't make sense to bring Hopewell Farm to its knees. It's me you want and me you got – stop torturing the Anders," Isaac shouted.

"This is about her, isn't it?" George said, suddenly figuring it out. "Now that I know the lengths you'll go to for that girl, I'll never give up until I take away everything you both own. I'll have the two of you begging for mercy before long."

The ground was slick thanks to the falling rain and all Isaac needed to do was outlast George on horseback. He'd soon tire and Isaac would be left steering the cattle. The only problem was the posse that followed George everywhere.

"Let's stop this now George you have enough. Get out of here now," Isaac demanded.

George felt his horse fading but he refused to lose to Isaac, so he raised his arm. It signaled his men to advance and help him with his pesky foe. Bullets started to fly, and Isaac realized that between George's men and himself was Abigail.

There was a good chance she'd get caught in the crossfire. He screamed for her to ride in the other direction, but she was either

ignoring his command or couldn't hear. It was impossible to get his message across so Isaac began to return fire. One of George's men pointed his pistol directly at Abigail.

He had a clear view of Abigail and Isaac couldn't let it happen. Isaac instinctively shot the man in the belly and he fell dead to the ground. Abigail's wide open green eyes saw the entire thing.

At that moment, Isaac began to shake and flashbacks to the war were all he saw. Blood, bayonets and the familiar screams from the battle field were clear images now. The moaning of dying men echoed in his brain.

Isaac found himself on the ground and he could see a dying man in the distance. It was just as it was back east. The smell of gunpowder brought Isaac back to North Carolina. Isaac ducked for cover behind a boulder, but no men came – Isaac felt abandoned by his men. Perhaps if he played dead the enemy would pass.

Isaac remained in hiding, thinking he was fighting for the Union Army, when a face appeared that brought him back. The green eyes, the scattering of freckles and the faint scent of lavender rescued Isaac.

He breathed deeply and the memories subsided. He remembered where he was, and it was the face of an angel that saved him, the face of Abigail. He shot a man in front of the woman whom he never wanted to see that side of him.

Abigail rushed to Nutmeg and took the blanket that was set under her saddle. She wrapped it around a shivering Isaac.

"Is George gone?" Isaac asked.

Abigail nodded her head. “He took off with the rest of my cattle and the scums who followed him were close behind,” Abigail said quietly.

“They all followed him except one, who’s lying dead on the ground. Dead because of the bullet I put in his belly.” Isaac trembled. “I never wanted you to see that part of me. It was something I left on the battlefield and I fear its return. I don’t want to be that monster again, who so easily takes a human life.”

Abigail put her arms around Isaac to assure him that he wasn’t a monster and she didn’t view him differently. He was the same man she rode with up the hill days ago and into town the day before.

“You would be feeling worse right now, Isaac, if I had been killed. Even worse than that, Uncle John would kill you if you hadn’t protected me. You had no choice. Any man would have done the same, whether they were in the war or not.”

“There has got to be a way to stop George and his men. I’m no longer sure that I’m the one who can help get it done. The day I ran into George Bail, this became more than just the outlaws invading Humble Creek. It became a vendetta that George has against me, and with me gone, it won’t be as bad.”

“We’ve talked about this, Isaac. I don’t want you to leave Humble Creek under any circumstances. This is your home now, whether you like it or not and there will be no more running away,” Abigail said flatly.

Isaac reached for Abigail’s arm and for the first time, he saw the blood soaked cloth covering her wound. “Abigail, you’re hurt. We have to clean the wound immediately – you could have been killed.” Isaac brushed off the horse blanket and whistled for Dandy.

“It’s fine Isaac. The bleeding has stopped, and I could use a scar to show all I’ve endured,” Abigail chuckled.

Isaac took Abigail’s arm in his hands to inspect the wound. He noticed a red stripe moving up her arm. If he learned one thing from the nurses and medics on the battlefield, it was that even the simplest wounds kill.

The only way to stop it from happening was to keep it clean and neither Isaac nor Abigail had water on hand. “If we don’t take care of this soon, you might lose your arm or die,” Isaac said.

Abigail didn’t take him seriously. “I’ve had worse, Isaac. I grew up on a farm and I had skinned knees that were deeper than this scratch.”

“I’m sure that Jane splashed water on your skinned knees and if they were bad enough covered them with a clean bandage,” Isaac said. He was serious and not cracking a smile. He snapped out of the confused state he was in because Abigail needed him. There was no time for his deficiencies to show. “George led us to an isolated area without a farm or ranch closer than our homes.”

“Fine then Isaac. We’ll just start riding home and be there by afternoon,” Abigail said.

“The general store is a whole lot closer. We’ll get the wound cleaned and dressed. Are you feeling okay?” Isaac asked.

“My arm itches and I could use sleep, since the outlaws only allowed me half a night’s rest. I’m touched that you care so much about my scratch Isaac, although I think you’re making a big deal out of nothing,” Abigail said as she hopped on Nutmeg and they started towards the general store.

Isaac knew there was much to be concerned with like their stolen cattle, but Abigail's health was more important. Peace wouldn't matter much if Abigail weren't around to enjoy it with.

She was the heart of both Magnolia Hill and Hopewell Farms because without her optimism they'd fail. John, Jane, Thomas and Isaac had to believe the outlaws could be beat or it wouldn't happen.

Humble Creek was quiet – the outlaws were likely busy with all the cattle they stole. Isaac lost the prized bulls he received from Vern Keller, which would be difficult to replace. The scoundrels wouldn't even realize how special the animals were or how to care for them.

Isaac tied Dandy up to a hitching post and helped a sleepy Abigail down from Nutmeg. She was favoring her arm, which she hadn't been doing earlier.

Isaac walked into the general store and asked for supplies to take care of Abigail. "Abigail was grazed by a bullet and I believe it should be cleaned out," Isaac said. The word bullet got the attention of Mr. and Mrs. Landell. Isaac briefly explained what happened and they weren't surprised because the gangs were getting bolder.

"I'll help," Martha said. "I worked at a doctor's practice in San Francisco. I know what to do."

Martha pushed up Abigail's sleeve, which wasn't easy since her arm had swollen. The red stripe stretched up most of her arm.

"Isaac, a person would only know how serious this was by having fought on the battlefield. We need to get this cleaned up right

away and disinfect it. But don't worry, Abigail will be just fine," Martha said. She was a kind and lovely woman. Isaac hoped she and Thomas would reconnect someday.

Isaac wasn't going to deny his involvement in the war but he'd rather not anyone know of his history with George. The Anders family knew and that was enough. "You're very perceptive Martha. I did serve in the Union Army before moving west. I thought my life would be relaxing here on the farm, but it hasn't proven to be true."

"Am I going to live? The two of you forgot I'm here," Abigail said, rousing from her sleepiness.

"Sorry, Abigail. You were dozing off because you're so tired. I'll get you home soon, where I'm sure I'll get an earful from your Uncle John," Isaac said.

"Don't worry Isaac, I'll protect you because I owe you one and I always repay my debts," Abigail said with a giggle and a yawn.

Isaac and Abigail started walking out when Martha called out to Abigail. "Did you remember to say hello to Thomas for me?" she asked.

"I don't think either of us have had the time to mention it, yet," Abigail said. "When things calm down a bit, we'll bring Thomas into town because I'm sure he'd like to see a friendly face."

Martha's face lit up. "Thank you and good luck. If I can help again, come by and ask."

Isaac and Abigail were finally heading home. Isaac wished he had better news to share with Abigail's family when they arrived, but

he didn't.

They lost every head of cattle and now all they could do was wait for George and his men to strike again. He wished they could get ahead of the bandits, but he just didn't know how.

Chapter 29

Abigail spent the next day recovering from her sleepless night and she assumed Isaac did the same. Neither of them had much left on their farms to tend.

The Anders had a collection of farm animals left, which included a dozen pigs, a coop full of chickens, horses, six goats, and a few dairy cows.

Leo was looking at sticking around which he always did when things got rough. Working without pay was a fact of life for any farm hand because one day things were profitable and the next they weren't.

John had a bruised hip and a sore back from falling off his horse, so he spent considerable time in front of the hearth. He complained but Abigail noticed a difference in his demeanor.

For the first time John Anders was scared. He was never one to admit defeat but now he seemed to all but give up. Abigail was sure he was thinking of life in San Francisco like before he came to help at the farm.

He was a dairy deliveryman who supplied milk and cheese to wealthy city folk. Abigail had gotten used to his gruff behavior and

even found it endearing. She always knew where she stood with Uncle John.

“Uncle John, it’s about time we ride out and look at the damage to the crop land. The tar is only one layer and we can begin removing it. It’ll be tedious work, but it has to get done sometime. Interested in joining me?” Abigail asked in the most cheerful voice she could muster.

“Not today and maybe not ever. I don’t see the use in it,” Uncle John said.

Abigail checked to see if her mother was any more motivated to fight for their farm. “What about you, Ma? It’s been a while since you’ve been on Poppy and she’d love the exercise.” Abigail knew her mother loved her horse, Poppy. She and the animal were bonded and when Jane was in the depths of despair, only Poppy could cheer her up. They were dark days when Ezra disappeared after the war but now was even gloomier.

Jane shook her head. “I don’t wish to see the crops as they are. In my memories the corn is high, and the wheat blows in the wind. I don’t want to destroy those memories.”

“Suit yourselves. I’ll go ask Thomas if he’ll go with me,” Abigail said.

“Don’t you dare,” Jane snapped. “This family is in bad shape and we don’t need Thomas taking steps back from his recovery. The destruction of the crops took a lot out of him and unless you have good news to deliver, leave your brother alone.”

She was feisty and protective – something Abigail was happy to see.

“As a matter of fact, I do have good news.” Abigail disappeared up to Thomas’s room. She rapped on his door and he was awake. “How are you doing since the crop disaster? We haven’t had much time to talk about it and I’ve been meaning to thank you.”

“For what?” Thomas asked. He was sitting at his desk writing to some of his friends from back east, the few who survived, like him.

“For fetching Isaac when I was inconsolable. You did the right thing.” Abigail sat on Thomas’s bed.

“You already returned the favor, Abigail, when you stopped me from having to go with John. If I had been chasing the outlaws with guns blazing, that would have been the end for me. I would have had all my dreams of being normal again ruined,” Thomas said. “Are we getting together with Isaac later today?”

“Yes, he’ll be over mid-day. What I really came to talk to you about was Martha Landell,” Abigail said, a smile on her face.

Thomas head snapped around and he looked directly at his sister. “Martha’s back?”

“She says hello. Martha helped me with the wound on my arm. And Ma doesn’t know about my arm and I’d rather she not. She worries enough as it is, without knowing that her only daughter had been shot.”

“Ma won’t hear it from me, Abigail.” Thomas repositioned himself and showed renewed interest. “Is Martha still as I remember with blue eyes that speak before she opens her mouth. Is her hair still black as night – well of course it is. Is she back in Humble Creek to stay? Is she spoken for?”

Abigail smiled. "I'm not sure about all those things, Thomas. You'll have to ask when you see her next. Isn't it amazing how our fortunes can change in an instant. I came in and you were solemn and now you're not."

Abigail liked nothing better than to see those she cared about happy. John and Jane were still wearing frowns but at least Thomas was smiling. Isaac was due soon, so Abigail made sure to wash-up before he arrived.

John and Jane sat on the porch swing, Abigail on the rocker while Thomas and Isaac leaned against the pillars.

"Who's going to throw out the first idea?" Isaac asked.

"I just don't think we can match them with their guns and horses. They come at us, take whatever they want. We can't defend ourselves anymore," John said. "They're not only good at being outlaws but they're better cowboys than most I've seen."

Jane cleared her throat. "What they're doing is illegal. They can't steal property that rightly belongs to someone else. Why don't we call the sheriff?"

Silence fell over the group because Jane just kept the household going and worried. No one knew that while stirring soup and mending garments, Jane Anders was having deep thoughts.

"Of course." Isaac said.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Uncle John said. "Nice job Jane."

Ma smiled and blushed.

“What do you know about Bill Fisk, John?” Isaac inquired.

“For generations, the Farley boys have been lawmen in these parts. The sheriff around here has always been a Farley until they ran out of men in the family, so they promoted the deputy. That would be Bill Fisk who wants to be seen as a tough lawman as a way of proving himself.”

“You’d think that Bill would be interested in cleaning up Humble Creek. That would mean getting rid of George and his gang of outlaws,” Isaac said. “I met Bill not too long ago and he was surprised to hear everything the outlaws had done.”

Abigail could tell everyone’s spirits were lifted by the prospect of getting the sheriff’s help.

“We can’t be sure about bringing anyone new on board, even the sheriff.” Abigail didn’t mean to throw a wet blanket on the plan, but she had a feeling that no one could be trusted. “What if we can’t trust him? What kind of sheriff doesn’t even know that bandits have been committing crimes in his town?”

"I disagree," Uncle John said. "We need protection, Abigail. The outlaws showed what they'll do to us without it. We have to ask the sheriff for help."

“I’m thinking like Abigail that we might not be able to trust the sheriff, which leaves the deciding vote to you, Thomas.” Isaac looked at Thomas.

“I think we could use the protection – can’t hurt. We should all go into town and approach Sheriff Fisk. I could use some writing

supplies from the general store and have to visit the post office.” Thomas was thinking of running into Martha Landell.

"I'll help get the team hitched to the wagon." Abigail looked at John. "We can all go in together. We should act together on this."

John held the reins as they rode into town. He insisted as the patriarch, although he would have been better off laying in the wagon bed. His back and hip were causing him excruciating pain. Isaac and Abigail were squeezed next to each other on the bench in the back.

It was meant for two, but Thomas was sharing. Abigail had never touched Isaac for such an extended time. She could have remained that way forever; Abigail felt warm and most importantly – safe.

John drove the wagon into town and tied the wagon to the hitching post near the sheriff's office. A walk by the saloon was necessary and a few outlaws were gathered. They watched the group as they approached the office and sneered but said nothing.

John walked close to Jane and Thomas did the same to Abigail. Isaac walked behind her, and Abigail could tell he wanted to say something to the criminals, but he didn't. He'd never do something that would put Jane or Abigail in danger.

Thomas's eyes were on the entrance to the general store from the moment they arrived in town. He was longing to see Martha Landell – even the slightest glimpse would send his heart soring.

Abigail nudged her brother. "Don't worry, after our visit to the sheriff, we'll go to the general store. Have you decided what to say?" Abigail asked.

"I'll say hello for starters." Thomas laughed. "Then I'll apologize. I should have written her. I hope she can forgive me."

Abigail nodded, feeling solemn. She too hoped that Martha would forgive Thomas and hear him out. If he began courting Martha again, she knew it would go a long way in completing the healing process.

John and Isaac led the others into the office where Bill Fisk was deputizing three men. That would have been a good sign, but Isaac told Abigail he recognized the men from their town meeting.

They were among the men Isaac suspected were outlaws. One of them still had tar on his boot. Abigail wanted to share the information with John but didn't have time. Sheriff Fisk concluded his business and greeted the group.

"I see the Anders family has come for a visit." Fisk turned to Isaac. "You're from Magnolia Hill Farm, if I recall – Isaac Curry, am I right?"

"Good memory, Sheriff. Do you have time to hear what we've come to say?" Isaac asked.

"Of course, I'm always here to help the good people of Humble Creek," he said. Sheriff Fisk twirled his handlebar mustache and pulled up his trousers. For being new to the job of sheriff, he seemed very confident. The bad feeling that Abigail had earlier was back and stronger than ever.

Abigail started by telling him about the destruction of Hopewell's crops and cattle theft. She expected Sheriff Fisk to jump out of his seat with surprise, but he didn't.

He kept his fingers on his facial hair and acted as if Abigail had just reported minor theft. "You can't imagine how upset we are, and we are here to ask for your protection. I see you have more men on board and maybe they need something to do," Abigail said.

The sheriff didn't like Abigail's final comment and he let her know. "I'll decide what to do with my men, Abby. I deputized them for a reason."

No one called her Abby. Uncle John tried that once and it never happened again after she shot daggers with her intense green eyes.

Abigail held on to her temper and looked at Isaac to take over.

"We have reason to believe – very good reason, that the outlaw gang is being led by George Bail. He's a dangerous man who has plans to take over the town of Humble Creek," Isaac said. He crossed his arms and waited for Sheriff Fisk to respond.

Sheriff Fisk did respond, and it wasn't what anyone expected. He chuckled and shook his head. "I had the pleasure of meeting George Bail and I don't believe a thing you're saying about him. In fact, I was expecting someone to come in and say things like this. George warned me. He said people are out to get him and he's merely looking for a fresh start in Humble Creek," he said. "I tend to believe him over an ex-soldier bearing a grudge like you, Major Isaac Curry."

A look of disgust and surprise came over Isaac. The others clearly felt the same. They all looked at the door and couldn't wait to rush out because they sensed they were in danger. Before long, they were in the wagon heading home.

Thomas missed his chance to see Martha Landell but getting out of

town alive was more important. Everyone was quiet on the way home because there were no words to describe how they felt about finding out that the sheriff was in the gang's pocket and there was no help coming from the law.

Chapter 30

Abigail was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for Thomas

when he returned from the barn. An egg casserole was just coming out of the oven when Thomas walked into the kitchen.

"How are the dairy cows?" Abigail asked.

"They're still in the barn. I guess George and his men haven't gotten around to stealing those yet," Thomas joked.

"You didn't see Martha and yet, you're still in good spirits. I can't believe you're the same man I knew last year at this time."

"I owe a lot to you and Isaac. He taught me that I'm a survivor. I made it through something terrible and lived to tell about it. The fact that I'm here is something to be proud of and I'm getting better," Thomas said. "I had so much bottled up inside and just getting it out helped immeasurably."

"Those memories had a stronghold on you like you were in a prison. That's never going to happen again because the outlaws can take almost anything, but they won't take your freedom," Abigail said confidently.

"Yup," Thomas agreed.

"We'll try and see Martha Landell again soon. As far as I know, she's not going anywhere, and I believe she's still available to court. Otherwise, why would she make it a point to ask about you not once but twice? She sought out Isaac to inquire and then came up to me." Abigail smiled.

"There's something I haven't told you, Abigail. I wrote a long letter to Martha, but I didn't get a chance to give it to her while we were in town. Will you drop it by the next time you go into town – that's the reason I ran out of pen and ink. Writing to my friends from the war is one thing but a letter to a woman who has my heart is another. I'm afraid I was a bit long-winded but there was a lot left unsaid between us when I headed out to serve. I can't be sure how the lovely Martha will react – at least my writing skills got good practice. With no cattle and no crops, maybe I'll become a novelist," Thomas said kiddingly.

At least Thomas was joking even though things were so dire. Uncle John's mood wasn't that different; he figured what more did they have left to take. Staying on the farm and standing their ground together was something.

Abigail filled Thomas's plate when she heard a knock at the door. She put down the pan and walked to the door. She thought it was Isaac, but he stopped knocking long ago. She was joined at the door by Uncle John carrying his rifle.

"I ain't expecting visitors, Abigail, and I don't recognize the horse out front." John pushed Abigail back.

"Open the door now or I'll shoot, and chances are I'll get one of you in the belly. It's Sheriff Fisk and I'm here on official business." He kept pounding.

Abigail and Uncle John were bewildered; John put his rifle to the side and hesitantly opened the door. Sheriff Fisk was standing with his deputies behind him. Their guns were drawn.

“Where’s Thomas Anders?” Sheriff Fisk asked and he didn’t receive a response as fast as he wanted so he raised his voice. “John, you know me well enough to realize, I’ll start shooting if Thomas doesn’t come forward – Now.” The deputies behind Sheriff Fisk took a step forward.

Jane stepped forward and she was just as confused as the rest of the family. “What do you want with Thomas, Bill? Goodness, what are you thinking, coming up here and causing such a ruckus? I know your ma, Bill, and she didn’t raise you to act this way. Come in with your friends, have some tea and we’ll talk about what’s happening.”

Abigail didn't know if her Ma was serious or if she was trying to stall. She likely thought that if Thomas were listening from the kitchen, he'd run. Abigail, however, knew that would never happen.

Thomas wouldn't ever leave his sister and mother and injured uncle alone in the house with armed men. He was probably eating and had no idea what was going on.

“Sheriff, what is it that you want with Thomas?” Abigail reiterated her mother’s question since he hadn’t spoken yet.

Sheriff Fisk was about to answer when Thomas came from the kitchen. He was standing tall and acting more composed than anyone else in the Anders family. He looked at Abigail. “I’ll take it from here, sis.”

“I’m here, Bill. What do you want?” Thomas asked.

“I’m here to arrest you as the real leader of the outlaws and it’s Sheriff Fisk – not Bill. I have more than enough witnesses. Take a good look around because it’s the last you’ll see of this place. You’ll be in the Humble Creek jail and eventually be hauled off to prison. You’ll grow old there, Thomas.”

“No,” Abigail said, loudly but Thomas gave a small shake of his head and when she looked into his eyes, he seemed strong. She somehow knew he could handle this, horrible as it might be. He was no longer the broken man that had come home from war.

Sheriff Fisk indicated for his men to take Thomas away. The two men grabbed Thomas roughly and threw metal cuffs around his wrists. They pushed Thomas in the back of the wagon they’d brought.

Jane collapsed in tears and John lunged towards Sheriff Fisk; Abigail held him back which was no easy task. Thomas called from the wagon. “Abigail, take care of Ma and tell Isaac what’s happened. I love you all and don’t worry because I’m stronger than you think. If this is the price I have to pay to keep you safe, so be it.”

One of the deputies slapped Thomas across the mouth to shut him up.

Abigail pressed her lips together, feeling furious. Jane cried and Uncle John spewed profanities.

Sheriff Fisk was satisfied with himself and smirked at Abigail. She was dumbfounded because they were arresting the wrong person. They warned the sheriff about George and then he came to arrest

Thomas instead. "You can't take a man from his home like this."

Sheriff Fisk laughed. "This is the west, Abby. You've spent too much time with that boy from Boston. I'm the law in this town. What I say, goes. I've had enough of you self-righteous Anders folk." Sheriff Fisk started riding away. He followed the wagon containing Thomas but looked back. He had one final thing to say.

"George is sure to be around the jail if Isaac feels like changing his mind." He kicked his heels into the horse's sides and disappeared from sight. Thomas was gone and the sheriff was as dirty as the bottom of a boot.

Isaac came to see Abigail later in the day with a handful of daisies he picked but dropped the flowers when he saw everyone in tears on the front porch. John took Jane into the house when Abigail asked to be alone with Isaac while she explained things.

"I saw Sheriff Fisk coming up the path earlier today and I thought maybe he came around to our way of thinking," Isaac said before he even reached the porch.

"No, Isaac. The sheriff has been completely corrupted by George. He accused Thomas of being the leader of the gang and hauled him off to jail. My brother won't survive in jail. He'll have nightmares and lash out at the guards. They'll hit back and probably kill him. This is the worst possible thing that could have happened." Abigail was talking through tears.

"Did Fisk say why he thinks Thomas is a criminal?"

"He said there are witnesses – many witnesses. He's the law and

now George has him on his side so nothing else matters. The last thing he said was that George will be waiting at the jail if you change your mind about selling the farm.”

Isaac’s face froze. It was as if he realized what a mess he had caused. It was bad before, but this was tearing Abigail apart and for the first time, she had a tinge of resentment towards Isaac. “You’re going to have to excuse me, Isaac. I have to be with my family.” She rushed to the porch leaving Isaac. Abigail had never been around Isaac for so long and not felt the need to reach out either give comfort or to be comforted by him. Abigail was empty inside.

Abigail walked into the parlor alone with no good news to share and no brilliant ideas to solve their serious problems. Leo had joined the family because he saw what was happening from the barn. He was always with the family through times of trouble and this time was no different.

“I should bring Thomas some items from home if they’re allowed,” Leo offered. “Sheriff Fisk and the others will view me as a neutral party, and they might even allow me to see Thomas. I’ve known Bill Fisk since before he could walk, and I have a few tricks up my sleeve. He’s scared of me because I know all the family secrets and Bill doesn’t like anything unflattering said about him. He has a chip on his shoulder the size of California.”

John perked up. "If there are secrets about Sheriff Fisk, I need to know. Let's have it, Leo.

Leo laughed. “I’ll keep what I know to myself until we really need it. Right now we don’t have enough to cause the sheriff to leave George’s side but just the sight of me will help. Fisk might show Thomas some kindness that he normally wouldn’t allow a prisoner.

It'd be nice if one of you could visit Thomas and promise him that we won't let him rot in jail. I was in jail once, a long time ago and a visit from my sweetheart made a huge difference. Married Marjorie the day I got out."

"If I could arrange to see Thomas, I think I could help calm his nerves. We spoke about his service in the Union Army in-depth and talking is what he needs," Abigail said. She also had to find a way to get Martha Landell to see Thomas but first, she had to find the letter and deliver it. Abigail felt slightly better being able to do something other than twiddling her thumbs. Having a purpose would help crowd out thoughts of Isaac Curry, which were negative at the moment.

Leo planned to go straight to the jail and have a talk with Sheriff Fisk. Before leaving, Leo peered out the window which looked out on the pasture. He saw Isaac standing like a scarecrow, looking confused and lonely. "Looks like that boy just lost his best friend. Would you know anything about that, Abigail?"

Abigail sighed. "I can't bear to look at Isaac Curry – I don't have a word to say to him. I need to be left alone with my thoughts. Can you all excuse me."

Abigail searched Thomas's bedroom for the letter he wrote to Martha Landell. She found it and the envelope wasn't sealed. Abigail held it for a good minute and thought about peeking at what Thomas wrote but decided against it.

As she dripped the wax seal on the parchment, Abigail grew more and more disappointed with herself for even considering reading the missive. Thomas was having everything taken away from him and his sister couldn't take away his privacy too.

Delivering the letter was the least Abigail figured she could do for her brother who had sacrificed so much.

Chapter 31

Abigail stepped off the front porch and saw that Isaac remained in the pasture. Only a short day ago, she would have run through the poppies to stand by his side.

Despite having lost so much, Abigail would have found peace. Now, Abigail couldn't tolerate the sight of him; she scurried in the other direction to the barn.

"Nutmeg, there you are. You're always here when I need you and never let me down, Abigail said to her horse as she pulled a carrot out of her pocket. Horses, unlike people, we're easy to please and never disappointed.

Abigail placed the saddle on Nutmeg's back and jumped on. She burst out of the barn door to the south pasture which was untouched by the outlaws. The grass was long and scattered with flowers of purple, yellow and red.

Abigail felt at ease as she rode fast and felt the wind rushing through her hair. She didn't bother with a hat and the ribbon that secured her hair fell to the meadow. It was left to linger with the bluebells and lavender and if one didn't know, they'd think it grew there.

Abigail was aware that Isaac watched as she rode through the meadow. Perhaps Isaac was miffed that he and Dandy weren't invited but today was all about Abigail. Enjoying the scents and sounds of Central California was nourishment for the soul.

Abigail traveled west where there was a dry prairie that ran for miles. Oak trees popped out of nowhere which made perfect spots to rest and get shade on a hot summer day.

Soon the clouds would be swollen with rain and bring new life to the area. Abigail loved the changing seasons, even though they weren't as dramatic as back east. She knew this through accounts told by Thomas who described brutal winters and humid summers.

Abigail didn't have to fear outlaws as she traveled along the jagged prairie. They weren't tough enough to make it where land wasn't quite so fertile and only the most clever farmers survived.

The land was used by someone though – the Kato and Yana Indian tribes. Pushed out of the fertile valleys, they adapted well to the dry land and made the most out of the tributaries, streams, and brooks that traveled like veins through the body over the dry land.

She was looking for one of those cool streams with a good bit of shade for Nutmeg. When she found it, Abigail would peel off her stockings and dip her toes in the water.

Abigail found a stream with a chestnut tree nearby and a thick swath of berry bushes that would make a delightful meal.

After her feet were bare she plunged them into the spongy mud of the stream's edge and wiggled her toes. She put her face towards the sun and popped an elderberry in her mouth. Joy had momentarily replaced sadness in her life.

"Are you just picking the berries to enjoy?" An Indian woman who looked about Abigail's age asked. Her English was halted but clear.

Abigail jumped because she thought she was alone. "Am I on your land? I didn't mean any harm."

She laughed. "My people don't believe that the land can be owned. It belongs to everyone. My name is Enola and my people are the Kato tribe. I only see the white man picking berries to mix with other things. Not often to they just enjoy the fruit as you were doing."

"I'm Abigail and I am just enjoying the berries and a bit of peace and quiet. Right now my life is chaotic, dangerous and sad." Abigail sighed.

"You are doing right to walk away and breathe. I too am seeking peace. Would you mind if I sat with you and shared this lovely place?" Enola asked.

"No, I'd be delighted. Tell me how you learned to speak English," Abigail said. She encouraged Enola to dip her feet in the water too.

Abigail discovered that Enola's father was a deserter from the war who was fighting for the Confederacy. He could no longer support the cause or war at all. He fell in love with Enola's mother and was somehow accepted into the tribe.

Enola was in love with a boy from an opposing tribe, which is why she was in need of peace right now. Abigail told her about the outlaws, Isaac, and her brother Thomas. They were fortunate to come upon each other, even if they never saw each other again.

"I should get home, or my parents will think I'm with Aru. Maybe

we were meant to find each other, Abigail. We are two broken souls but together we are one healthy one. Know you're not alone and trust your ability to make it through these trials," Enola said. She took off her beaded necklace and put it around Abigail's neck. "Good luck Abigail."

Abigail pulled off the bracelet she wore and pressed it into Enola's palm. "It's all I have but keep it and think of me. Good luck Enola."

When Enola left Abigail would have thought meeting the other woman was a dream, but she had the necklace. It was nice to know she wasn't alone in the world. Abigail laid back in the soft grass.

She closed her green eyes and instead of sleeping, thought about her past. When she took the time, Abigail realized that her goal in life was to keep the family together. Abigail tried, but things weren't working out well because they were as scattered as ever, and she was losing faith.

Abigail knew from a young age that it was her job to keep the Anders family together. Her mother was busy keeping the house and going to church.

Thomas and her father would have gone wild had not Abigail been the calming and unifying force in the family. Being a girl, she could have faded away, but didn't.

Abigail did everything alongside Thomas and her father, keeping them happy and optimistic. She wanted to make being an Anders on Hopewell farm a source of pride.

Abigail was five when she first became aware that her mother Jane was unable to have more children. She was in the parlor while her parents were in the kitchen discussing their latest loss of a child.

Apparently, it had been happening a few times a year since Abigail was born.

Her Ma and Pa were lamenting the fact that they'd not have another son. It was a turning point for Abigail. From that moment on, she tried to make up for not having more boys. She had to be the daughter they loved while making up for any boys they didn't have. Abigail had an unfounded fear that her family would collapse if she didn't make up for their loss.

She learned to cook and clean but also played the role of a son. Abigail allowed her father to shape and mold her just like she was a son. She rode horses better than any girl could be expected and pulled her weight on the farm just as well as a boy. It was tiring trying to keep up, but Abigail did it and her family was happy.

Then came the war and Abigail was no longer able to hold the family together. She did, however, hold out hope that her father and Thomas would return home.

Abigail believed that things would go back to normal. Having the boys home would allow her the freedom to spread her wings a bit; maybe find a suitable husband and start a family of her own. Thomas and her father came back as strangers and Abigail's best efforts weren't able to hold things together.

Uncle John's arrival was supposed to save her little family when Ezra disappeared. Thomas had a long road ahead of him, but Abigail had faith that with her help he would thrive. Doing his chores until Thomas came out of his malaise seemed to be working.

Abigail was back to doing as much as possible to keep her family together. The outlaws were a problem but hadn't invaded

Hopewell farm and Abigail thought they'd be spared.

Then Isaac appeared and out of the blue she had the help and hope for the future she'd been waiting for. Isaac's farm started to thrive, and Abigail was sure that would help keep away the outlaws.

Of course, there were feelings that came with Isaac – feelings Abigail never had before. Isaac wasn't perfect but no one was. When Isaac started to help Thomas, she breathed a sigh of relief. She had fought hard to keep her family together and it paid off.

Now, the outlaws were threatening and Thomas was wrongly imprisoned. Abigail laid on the soft damp grass right back where she started, and she felt out of hope and out of energy. It was impossible not to place some of the blame on Isaac Curry. It was his history with the outlaw that brought the Anders family to this point.

The cattle were stolen, and the crops destroyed. Worst of all, Thomas was in danger. Abigail clutched her beads and sobbed. It wasn't a sad cry, as much as it was a healing one. Abigail had to breakdown completely before she built herself back up. Her muddy feet were cold and raindrops beginning to fall.

Abigail looked at Nutmeg and she nickered. If the horse could talk he'd tell her it was time to head back home. It wasn't like Abigail to feel sorry for herself long and it was time to consider options.

Doing something about the problem instead of wasting time placing blame was a better use of her time. It didn't matter if Isaac had a part in how bad things got; he was still in Humble Creek and he could be a part of the solution.

Fighting wasn't the answer to the problem – it never was. Guns

caused the loss of life and the loss of trust. Revenge and vendettas were powerful and until they could be put to rest, nothing would change.

Abigail knew she couldn't solve the problem alone, so she hopped on Nutmeg and started to charge back towards Humble Creek. The rain was coming down heavy and Abigail thought it was fitting. She had cried tears that cleansed her soul and the raindrops were finishing the job.

Nutmeg splashed through puddles and more of Abigail's dress was brown instead of green. She didn't even care what she looked like and even laughed as she raced past the oak trees so fast that they became blurs. Abigail's hope and optimism came over her with each breath of the dewy air.

Before heading down the twisty road, Abigail stopped at the general store. She had the letter with Martha's name on it, that had been kept dry in Nutmeg's saddlebags. Abigail was determined to deliver it.

"Hello, Mrs. Landell," Abigail said as she pushed open the door causing the bell to jingle.

"Abigail, I heard what happened to your brother. Is it true? Is Thomas leading the destructive gang of outlaws?" Mrs. Landell asked with fear on her face knowing that her only daughter was associated with Thomas.

"No, no – it's absolutely false. It's a malicious action taken by the outlaws who have corrupted our very own sheriff." Abigail went on to explain the situation to Mrs. Landell. She was stunned to

hear that things had taken such a turn. "I have this note from my brother to your daughter Martha. I assure you his intentions are pure, and I ask that you get it in her hands."

"I will Abigail because I know the Anders family to be good and hardworking. Mr. Landell and I like serving Humble Creek and if there is any way we can help restore peace, let us know." Mrs. Landell took the note in her hands. Abigail knew delivering the letter was the right thing to do.

"Just knowing you believe in us helps. We'll keep you up to date." Abigail started to leave but had one more thing to say. "Mrs. Landell, as much as my brother Thomas is innocent, Isaac Curry is also. I'm afraid they will try to slander him next."

"I know that dear. Isaac has honest eyes. I should add that those eyes are often on you." Mrs. Landell smiled.

Abigail blushed as she walked out.

Chapter 32

Isaac's heart broke when he watched Abigail race out of the barn. He would have given anything to join her as he had so many times before. Unfortunately, her emotions were raw, and her anger was apparent. Abigail never looked so lost and angry – she was far away, and Isaac wasn't hopeful that Abigail would ever come back.

Isaac's body tingled and his anger at George was closer to the surface than ever before. Isaac felt like if the man were in front of him he'd attack him in a fit of rage. Isaac didn't feel like he could control his emotions. Isaac placed his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes to get rid of images that he didn't want to see.

What he witnessed in the war had never been so close to the surface. When he looked up he saw Jane and John Anders approaching and didn't know exactly how to feel. Not that it mattered because they were coming regardless of how he felt.

"It looks like rain, Isaac. Come with us to the porch," John said. He was supporting Jane who was sobbing and inconsolable.

The three of them walked up to the porch where Thomas was arrested earlier. They all looked down at the wood slats and were probably thinking the same thing. It was the last place Thomas stood before being hauled off to jail. It proved to be too much for

Jane who would have fallen over if not for John.

"I'm going to leave you, boys. Can you please help me to my room, John?" Jane asked.

John took her away and Isaac was relieved in a way. She was so sad and it was all his fault. Jane made Isaac think of how badly he hurt Abigail. Jane seemed to have aged 10 years in a few hours. What had he done to the Anders family?

"I gave Jane a bit of moonshine I keep hidden. We won't hear from her for a while but when she wakes up she'll realize today was not a nightmare," John said.

"Well, it is a nightmare but a living one," Isaac said. "We can't do anything but regroup – again. There has to be a way. But we all need the night to process what happened today. I imagine that's what Abigail is off doing."

John didn't have much to add. He nodded his head because he was dumbfounded and didn't know where to turn. "I'm hoping Leo made progress with Sheriff Fisk. If Thomas can have a visitor, at least we'll know he's still alive."

Isaac had heard enough and was overwhelmed by guilt. "I'm heading back to Magnolia Hill. Know that I'm not going anywhere until Thomas is free. There is nothing I won't do to make this wrong right." Isaac tipped his hat and kicked the mud. The gloomy weather matched his mood perfectly.

Isaac trudged through the puddles on his way home, wishing one would open up and swallow him. He was gutted and had only

experienced sorrow so deep when each of his brothers and his mother died. Isaac thought that hollow feeling was gone and would never be felt again.

Isaac remembered back to his talk with Uncle John when they first met. He said Abigail deserved a man who wasn't weak. Isaac was silly enough to think he could be that man. He thought the nightmares and episodes were banished and he was finally able to put the war behind him.

Isaac saw how disturbed Thomas was and figured he was far beyond him in his recovery. He felt pity that Thomas was having difficulty dealing with his memories because he thought those were behind him – Isaac didn't know they were lurking in the recesses of his mind.

If George approached Isaac again, he'd freeze. It'd be fine if he were alone but if someone else was with him they'd catch a bullet too. If it was Abigail – the thought was too much for Isaac to take. He splashed water on his face because the thought of Abigail being harmed was too much to take.

Isaac walked out with his basin so he could refill it at the pump. He heard a noise in the bush, so he dropped the basin, which shattered, and whipped out his gun.

“Stop, don't shoot. It's Abner.” Isaac's foreman walked towards a shaking Isaac.

“What the heck, boss?” Abner asked. “If it was dark, you could have killed me. Not your fault, I have to remember not to sneak up on folks.

“I took off my holster when I got home. I wouldn't have pulled the

trigger – I would have frozen,” Isaac said as he kicked the chunks of broken clay off the path.

“I saw action over at Hopewell this morning. You know what that was all about?”

“Yea, Abner. They wrongly accused Thomas Anders of leading the outlaws,” Isaac replied.

“No, that has to be wrong.” Abner looked dumbfounded. “Tell me how that happened.”

Isaac explained the situation to Abner who listened intently. He didn’t see how Isaac could blame himself for anything because as far as he could see, Isaac did nothing but help the town of Humble Creek.

When Isaac told Abner about his history of having been a soldier and how he knew George, Abner was stunned. He insisted, however, it didn’t change things and Isaac shouldn’t be blaming himself.

"Sometimes, we can be our own worst enemies, Isaac. You see yourself as a bad person, but I look at you as a hero. I'm just a dumb farmhand, but that's the way I see things."

“I don’t see you that way at all,” Isaac said.

Abner laughed. “Proves my point.”

Isaac patted his friend on the back and went inside. He collapsed on the sofa he and Abigail salvaged from the barn. The cushions were musty, and one leg was missing but they managed to bring it back to life.

Abigail stuffed sprigs of lavender in the cushions and Isaac rebuilt the frame. Isaac could think of nothing but Abigail when he laid his head back.

Isaac's first day in Humble Creek could have been the worst of his life except for his years in the war. Abigail was the one who made it one of the best and most fortunate. She rode up behind him on Nutmeg with force and grace.

Two things Isaac never knew could exist together and yet Abigail pulled them off. He felt drawn in by her and intimidated by her at the same time. Simply put, Abigail was magical and she cast a spell upon him on that first day.

Even when he tried to hide his history from Abigail, she forgave him. He put her in danger when he had an episode in town and Abigail forgave him. Her crops were destroyed and she embraced him and even after her cattle were stolen – Abigail didn't blame him. Now this whole situation had gone too far. And she felt that he was responsible for her brother being falsely accused.

Thomas had been thrown into a dirty jail, which was an ordeal from which he might never recover. Being in closed spaces was never easy for someone who had been in the war. Even if you weren't captured by the Confederates and thrown in jail, the rumors of war-time prisons were inescapable. There were soldiers taken into the places who were never heard from again.

Isaac had ruined his chances with Abigail and he'd never forgive himself. If life continued for Isaac and George didn't take him out, he'd never forget Abigail Anders. On his death bed, Isaac would remember the golden-haired beauty who had been so close to being his. It was a perfect friendship that he ruined. Not many women would give Isaac another chance after the problems he

caused, certainly not a woman as smart as Abigail.

Isaac laid on the couch as he smelled the sweet scent of lavender. He was drifting off to sleep. When Isaac heard hooves moving through the slick mud towards the house. He sighed heavily and listened as his fate drew closer. The only person it could be was George Bail. He must have tired of waiting for Isaac to sell the farm and decided to take it. He hoped Abner wasn't armed, Dandy wasn't slaughtered, and that Annabelle would survive.

There was a consistent pounding on the door. Isaac thought it was mighty kind for George to even knock. He left his gun on the table because there was no use defending himself. It would be better for everyone if he were taken out of the situation for good. George would only need a single bullet to take care of Isaac.

Isaac pulled open the door. "Abigail."

Her green eyes glowed and they weren't vacant like they were the last time he saw her. "Isaac. Looks like we both spent time in the rain – glad I'm not the only one who looks like they fell in the creek. We need to talk – can I come in?" Abigail asked.

"Yes, of course. Come in and take a seat. I'll start a fire in the hearth and put the kettle on for tea. I think we can both use it." Isaac nervously loaded logs into the fireplace. "I like your necklace – is that new."

Abigail touched her beads. "Yes, I received these from a friend. I know she was real because she gave me this necklace, but she seemed like a dream. I needed someone to talk to and there she was. Her name was Enola – an Indian woman who spoke perfect English. I was used to sharing my feelings with you but, well, you know."

Isaac nodded his head. "I do know. It has been a jarring day and it wasn't each other we were able to turn to. I chatted with Abner who provided encouraging words in the same way your Indian friend did for you. I'm sorry to have hurt you, Abigail and your family too." Isaac rubbed his eyes. "I'm tired of saying sorry, Abigail. I want to make things right once and for all."

"I want that too, Isaac." Abigail outstretched her arms and he stood up and walked into them. They held each other for a long moment and then he went back to building the fire.

Isaac felt his heart slow down and the rage inside of him subside. He felt anything was possible with Abigail by his side. The road ahead was long but once again, Isaac could breathe.

Chapter 33

“T he fire is burning and the tea is poured. Now, how about that talking you promised. Delaying this even an hour might mean life and death for Thomas. Leo is looking into getting me in to see my brother, but I haven’t heard back yet.”

“I have a feeling you came with a plan, Abigail, but first you should know how I’m feeling – what I’m capable of. I’ve been walking around like I’m cured. I thought the nightmares and flashbacks were over. I made you think I was going to battle George Bail and walk away the brave hero but I’m not capable of any of that. I can’t save this town and I can’t save you. When I saw George and his men charging, I panicked and shot a man. That could have easily been you because I think I unloaded my gun with my eyes closed.”

“What?” Abigail said. “You shot that man on purpose to save me, Isaac. There was no panic in your eyes. You were determined. You weren’t going to let me die.”

“But...”

"No, listen. I'm not asking you to do what you're not capable of, Isaac. I'm not a dewy-eyed young woman with my head in the clouds. You forget that I've seen first hand what war does to a

soldier. My bedroom is next to Thomas's and I heard him calling out at night. I saw him the morning after an episode when he was drenched in sweat and items in his room were thrown about."

"That's not too different than some of the nightmares I've had. There were times I thought I'd be better off dead. I'm trying to tell you that I'm weak. Your uncle told me that you deserved more than a weak man," Isaac said. "I don't think I have it in me to fight anymore. I'm scared of what it will do to me again and if I'll even survive. I'm afraid of spiraling out of control and not finding my way back."

It was the first Abigail heard about Uncle John saying she needed a strong man. She was steaming mad. "Uncle John needs to mind his own business because I have always made my own decisions. It's how I lived my life before he came to Humble Creek and it's how I'll continue to live my life long after he's gone." Abigail started pacing. Her independence made it impossible for her to tolerate meddling in her personal life. "I love my uncle, but he's stepped over the line. If he knows so much, where the heck is his wife?"

"That's harsh, Abigail. Uncle John meant well and he's right. You deserve better," Isaac said.

"He's wrong about you being weak, Isaac. A man doesn't have to fight to show his strength. I've been thinking and I concluded that you don't have to fight again to stop this senseless assault on Humble Creek and George doesn't have to either," Abigail said and waited for Isaac's response. She expected he'd be confused.

Isaac stared at her, bewildered.

"I'm sorry Abigail, but how the heck do you think George Bail will agree to stop fighting. You saw what he did already, and I think it's

just going to get worse.”

“Isaac, you hate this fighting, am I correct?” Abigail asked.

“Of course. It puts you and your family in danger.”

“I’m guessing George Bail hates it too. He fought the same war as you that resulted in so many senseless deaths. You weren’t the only one who lost loved ones and had to alter your life plans. George is a man with feelings and you two probably have more in common than you realize.”

“I can’t believe that of George Bail,” Isaac said. Abigail expected his hesitancy, but she was determined to convince him otherwise.

“George doesn’t know any other way to solve his problems and I think he only needs to be shown the way. George was a good soldier – at least that’s what I gather. He went toe to toe against you and neither of you walked away victorious. Military life was all about respect and order. The outlaws are the opposite of that and deep in my heart I know that must bother George. You have people pointing you in the direction of peace and George has no one to teach him. I believe, if George is shown there is more to the solution other than thieving – he’ll listen.”

“You’re asking me to give my enemy a lot of credit, Abigail,” Isaac said.

Abigail could tell Isaac was softening to her way of thinking. “It requires you to take a leap of faith. A leap only a brave man can take.”

“Brave is something I aspired to be, but I tried and failed,” Isaac said.

Abigail slapped her hands together. “Hogwash, Isaac Curry. Bravery is not earned through violent acts but through doing the things that scare you. Bravery is doing the right thing when maybe it isn’t the most popular thing.”

“You’re a wise woman, Abigail. I’ll sleep on what you’ve said. We will have to sit down with Uncle John and Jane to discuss what steps to take next.”

Abigail felt like a weight was lifted from her shoulders after talking to Isaac. She hated the feeling that she wasn’t moving forward in her quest to get Thomas freed. Her larger goal, which was to save Humble Creek as she had come to know and love it, was on track too. Her next stop was the barn where she hoped to find Leo and receive news about Thomas.

Abigail walked through the muck to the barn. The farm didn't look so beautiful with the crops destroyed and no cattle grazing in the distance. Abigail, however, thought of how it once looked and how it could look again in the future. It didn't take anything but a good imagination and a positive attitude. Abigail had both as she pushed open the heavy door and walked Nutmeg to her stall.

“Leo, you’re here. I hope you’ve been to see the sheriff and you have good news to share.” Abigail joined him in milking the cow. There weren’t many chores left on Hopewell Farm so when work had to be done, Abigail was eager to jump in.

Leo looked up with his creased face and smiled as he shook his head. “Thomas sure surprised me and I ain’t easy to surprise.”

“I can’t tell if you were pleasantly surprised or woefully surprised,”

Abigail said.

Leo smiled. "Your brother is stronger than I'd be if I were sitting in that cage. He sat erect and wouldn't let anything those scoundrels said – get to him. They tried to break Thomas, but your brother wouldn't let em."

Abigail almost burst open with joy. "Are you sure we're talking about my brother Thomas Anders? Just a week ago he cowered when there was too much noise. He'd have jumped out of his skin at the sight of an outlaw."

"Yes, ma'am. He's not giving up because he knows something better awaits him when he's set free. He's convinced that good will win over evil and he refuses to let you or the rest of the family down," Leo said as he continued to milk till the bucket began to overflow. "I have more good news."

"What's that, Leo?" Abigail asked as she skimmed the cream off the set milk that had been milked that morning and filled the churn.

"Sheriff Fisk will allow you to see Thomas but there are conditions," Leo warned.

"I'll stand on my head if I have to," Abigail chuckled. "What are the conditions?"

"You can't bring anything to Thomas and there will be a deputy present when the two of you meet," Leo replied.

"I can deal with that. I guess it means I won't be sneaking in a rifle or planning a jailbreak," Abigail said sarcastically. "When can I go?"

“At the break of dawn. We can take the wagon. I’ll drive you in because we have a few dozen eggs for Mrs. Landell. Goodness knows your ma can use the small amount of money they’ll bring.”

Abigail went to the general store and felt fortunate to see Martha behind the counter.

“Abigail, welcome. I was hoping to see you because I heard what happened with Thomas and it breaks my heart. No one who matters believes Thomas deserves to be in jail. When your brother left for the war my heart was broken and I vowed to leave Humble Creek and never come back.”

“Did you receive the letter he wrote?” Abigail asked. “I’m hoping you might find it in your heart to forgive him.”

"I did get the letter. The parchment is stained from the tears of joy and longing I cried while reading it." Martha put her palm to her forehead. "I shouldn't be telling you how I feel before sharing the words with Thomas."

“No, it’s beautiful and if you allow, I’ll share your sentiments with him. I’m going to see him this morning and knowing you care will lift his spirits,” Abigail said as she placed her basket of eggs on the counter.

"Can you deliver Thomas my reply? I wrote it last night and I would love him to read how I feel – written in my hand."

“Unfortunately, I’m not allowed to bring anything into the jail to give Thomas,” Abigail said. The look of disappointment on Martha’s face was almost too much to take. Abigail thought of a

solution that would make everyone happy. She left the general store with a smile on her face and Martha was pleased too.

Abigail hated entering the Sheriff's Office and seeing the corrupt sheriff. She wished Leo would tell her the secrets he knew about Bill Fisk, but Leo liked keeping the information in case he needed it in the future. It was always good to know something embarrassing about the town sheriff – not that Leo would be getting into trouble anytime soon.

A deputy showed Abigail to a chair in front of the bars that separated him from Thomas. They grasped hands and Abigail blinked back tears while Thomas remained stoic.

“Are you okay, Thomas? I assure you that we’re working to get you out of here,” Abigail said.

“I know you are Abigail. It’s what’s getting me through, and I assure you, I’m doing fine. I close my eyes and remember the happy times we had on the farm. I also think of the times to come because I believe the happy times will come again. I was scared when I got here and knew I wouldn’t make it if I let them get in my head. I was in the depths of despair but I found my way back, I’m not going there again.”

“I’m proud of you, Thomas. And I delivered your letter to Martha,” Abigail said.

“Thank goodness you did. I want her to know how I feel. Just in case this doesn’t turn out well,” Thomas said. “How did she seem? Do you think she...?”

"I think she does," Abigail said and winked.

Abigail scratched under her straw hat and got the tiny paper that Martha had written her note on, hiding it in her palm.

“It’s been so good to see you, Thomas. But I must go now.” She took his hands, passing the note to him, seeing in his eyes when he understood. “Stay strong.”

“I will,” he said, smiling gratefully at her.

Fisk was sitting by the door when Abigail left. “Good thing you didn’t try and sneak something in your basket. I’m not sheriff for nothing. There isn’t anything that gets past me, Abby.” Bill Fisk sat back in his chair. He was proud of himself for no reason.

“I’m sure you believe that’s true, *Billy*.” The sheriff frowned at her use of his nickname from when he was a child. “I’ll be sure to say hello to Leo for you.” Abigail walked out as Sheriff Fisk nearly fell out of his chair.

Abigail rode Nutmeg home as fast as she could. She couldn’t wait to share the good news about Thomas with Jane and Uncle John. Who would have thought that Thomas would end up being the strongest Anders of all.

Chapter 34

Isaac arrived at Hopewell early and he watched as Abigail came flying up the path on Nutmeg. He could see from a distance that she had a smile on her face which came as a surprise and a great relief.

Isaac couldn't imagine visiting with Thomas brought good luck but apparently, it did. If not that, at least she didn't have bad news. As Abigail was walking towards the porch she was also laughing, which confused everyone.

"Abigail, are you delirious?" Jane asked.

"I got a letter from Martha to Thomas. And he is staying strong. So I'm happy."

Abigail told Isaac, Jane and Uncle John, how incredible Thomas was and they breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"I'm here to tell you about what Abigail has thought up. It's a product of her impressive mind. She believes we can achieve peace in Humble Creek without any more thieving or bloodshed," Isaac said. He munched on a piece of apple cobbler prepared by Jane.

John let out a sarcastic laugh. "First Thomas surprises me and now

this. What next – Is George going to turn into a good guy?” He asked as he continued to chuckle.

“That’s the plan, Uncle John.” Abigail still seemed mad at John for intruding into her relationship with Isaac.

Isaac decided to stay out of that one. “I’m going to try and talk some sense into George. Abigail says, and I think she’s right, that I have a lot in common with George. We were both scarred by the war and took different paths to get over what we saw. I suppose I could easily have been like George if I hadn’t taken the road I did.”

“I’m not so sure you would have gone that far,” Abigail said. “The plan is for Isaac to draw George out from the saloon while I hide behind the general store and you, Uncle John, will be behind the saloon.”

Uncle John had issues with the plan. "I don't mind providing back up in the event something goes wrong – which it will. My problem is you doing the same Abigail. This could result in an all out gunfight and that's no place for a lady."

Abigail's face grew red. Isaac knew there was no holding her back, so he prepared for a vicious response.

“Uncle John, in case you didn’t notice, I’m more capable than most men in Humble Creek and that includes you. My father taught me to ride and shoot. Ma made sure I had all the good traits of a woman. I use both those sides of myself in every situation. I can outthink any scoundrel that comes up against me and that matters for a lot.” Abigail said. “This won’t result in a shootout. That’s the whole idea.”

Isaac put his hands together and applauded Abigail’s defense.

There was nothing Uncle John could say in return. "George Bail went to war because he was asked to defend what was his. As crazy as the war was, there was order and organization. George or any other soldier wasn't born to fight – that's not really who they are. We all learned violence was the way to solve problems and it's time we unlearn it."

John removed his hat, raked his fingers through his hair and sighed. He looked Abigail straight in the face. She didn't blink, so he knew she wasn't moving from her plan. John remembered Ezra before he left for the war.

He was hard headed and always stood by what he said. His daughter was just like him. Isaac could see John realize for the first time how incredible Abigail truly was.

"I can see you have questions John, and I do too. What if George is unwilling to listen to a thing I have to say? I die and nothing changes. Thomas is still in jail and Hopewell Farm is still at risk," Isaac said.

Abigail stood from the porch swing, so she could provide detail about how she hoped things would work. "With Uncle John and I in place, Isaac will ride into town and draw George out of the saloon."

Isaac raised his hand with a concern. "What if his men kill me and George never comes out to talk?"

"That won't happen because you were George's foe during the war, and he relishes your face to face meetings. Am I right in saying no soldier wants to be labeled a coward?" Abigail asked.

"You're right. A true soldier wants to look his enemy in the eye.

You were a Major in the Union Army and he was the same in the Confederate Army. You're George's only equal in this town and he'll want to hear what you have to say," Abigail said.

Jane had been sitting quietly but had a good idea. "If you think things are about to go south, give Abigail a signal." Jane looked at Abigail. "I want at least one living child when this is over. I want you to run for the hills if this mission begins to head south. Before you disagree with me, remember, I'm your ma."

Abigail nodded her head. "Yes, Ma."

"I'll tug at my blue scarf if George isn't buying what I'm selling. I'm hoping that he'll at least agree to talk," Isaac said.

"I hope you don't forget the reason for all this," John added.

"Of course I won't, John. The first thing I'll ask George for is the release of Thomas Anders." Isaac noticed Abigail looking in the distance. A look of concern came over her face. "See something you don't like, Abigail?"

"There's a cloud of dust building. It could be George and his men because it's not just a lone horseman. Ma, get in the house. I can't imagine what they plan to take now. There isn't much left," Abigail said.

John put his hand on a rifle and Abigail did the same. Isaac checked his holster.

John put his hand to his forehead and looked in the distance toward the approaching horses. He was all but sure it was the outlaws. "If they aim to take this house, they'll have to kill me and drag my body away."

Isaac looked and the first thing he noticed was a familiar dapple grey horse. He was admiring it at the town meeting and it belonged to Joe Gruber who'd had a hundred head of cattle stolen.

Others came into sight that he recognized as Ed Parnell and Len Struthers. All the men were from Humble Creek and none of them had their guns pulled. "Put your guns away. Friends are coming to call, that's all. Goodness knows we can use more friendly faces around here."

Jane came out of the house with a pitcher of lemonade and a pan of cornbread she made earlier in the day. "I haven't had callers in an age. Lucky I cook when I'm nervous and I made an extra batch of bread," Jane said. "Look, Fern Johnson is coming. I haven't seen her out since her husband died." Jane was excited to see town folk that she hadn't seen since the outlaws made it hard to get to church.

Isaac stepped off the porch as they got off their horses. "Welcome – even though this isn't my place. We were just talking about a plan to turn things around and I hope you'll back us," Isaac said as he shook hands with the men as they climbed off their horses.

"I was in the general store," Joe Gruber said. "I heard about Thomas and figured you could use some extra support about now."

Joe, Ed, Len, and Fern thought Abigail and Isaac had a good plan and thought by just being in town might help. They agreed to gather at the post office which wasn't unusual and wouldn't arouse the suspicions of the outlaws. If it turned into a shoot out they said they'd rather join than sit around and do nothing.

Fern wasn't willing to pull a gun so she decided to join Jane at the farm where they could pray together. It was better than nothing. In

a town as small as Humble Creek word got around. The men found that Isaac had fought in the war and knew George.

Isaac was pleasantly surprised when no one held it against him. They even tried to understand his misgivings about fighting for fear of what it might do to them. More than ever, Isaac realized the people of Humble Creek were good people who wanted nothing more than to bring peace to the area.

“I want to get back to the ranch before sunset, but you can expect me to be at the post office in the morning. With any luck, we’ll be celebrating in the streets,” Joe said.

“You know what I look forward to, walking into the saloon, sipping a whiskey, and playing a hand of cards with friends. Outlaws have taken over that place and it’s not safe for any of us,” Ed said. “Not like I plan to spend all my days there. Betty wouldn’t allow that at all,” he said referring to his wife.

"The thing I miss and I'm sure Jane would agree is being able to safely get to the church at least once a week. With my husband gone, I need the word of God more than ever," Fern said.

“Hallelujah to that, Fern,” Jane stated her agreement with what Fern was saying.

Isaac promised that he was going to try to bring peace back to Humble Creek and he appreciated everyone’s support. Being a part of something good was the feeling he hoped to share with George Bail.

It felt good to belong to a cause and Isaac was ready to offer George an alternative to being a thieving outlaw. When everyone left, Isaac announced his departure.

"I'll be here at first light and we should plan on being in our places by midday. Joe spends a lot of time on a bench in front of the post office, since his cattle are gone. He notices George arrive at the saloon by late-morning every day," Isaac said.

"Do you recommend we ride in separately?" Abigail asked.

"Yes, definitely," Isaac responded. "We don't want to raise suspicions that we're up to something. The outlaws are always on the lookout."

Jane and Uncle John went into the house. Abigail asked Isaac to stay on the porch with her. He couldn't refuse, spending time alone with Abigail was Isaac's favorite thing to do. The sun was setting and there was a slight break in the rain.

"It's so fresh after the rain stops. Everything smells so clean," Abigail commented.

"I enjoy the scent as well, but I have a feeling you asked me to stay so we could talk about more than the weather." Isaac was expecting something negative because he had been firm about not wanting to fight. Abigail claimed he didn't have to fight but maybe she had a change of heart. The way things were going for him, Isaac wouldn't be surprised.

"Thank you, Isaac, I don't know if you realized what you've brought to my life. It's so much more than safety and that's a big thing, but not all."

Isaac put his hand up. "Abigail, please..."

Abigail interrupted him. "Let me finish, Isaac. You're always saying how strong and positive I am. Don't you realize that I haven't

always been this way,” Abigail backed up. “I have been this way but not as much as I am now. You have faith in me, and it makes me more confident. I was just doing chores and hoping that my father would return. Everything was going to get better when my father came home; Thomas would get well, the outlaws would disappear, and I’d feel safe again. With you by my side, I realized that I could have all that without my father.”

“Am I allowed to speak yet?” Isaac asked with a smile.

"No. I was afraid to admit that my father wasn't coming home because if he didn't I'd never forgive him. You taught me forgiveness and understanding. It wasn't your fault or Thomas's fault that you were so deeply affected by the war. It was also not my father's fault – he just handled it differently. One last thing – your kindness inspires me. I don't know where to start with this one. You have taken on the defense of my family and the entire town of Humble Creek as if you've lived here forever. You give without being asked and look deep inside people to discover their potential. Abner has been in this town since before I was born, and you gave him a shot. I've never seen him walk so upright. He's beaming with pride." Abigail fell silent, then she laughed. "You can talk now."

“You had everything inside of you when I met you. Perhaps I shined a light on what was there all along. It was my pleasure to do so. I’m the one who should be thanking you, Abigail, for giving without expecting anything in return. From my very first day in Humble Creek. I don’t know how I’m going to repay you.”

“For starters, you can survive tomorrow and set Thomas free,” Abigail said

The setting sun glowed behind Abigail’s head as she spoke. She

looked like an angel. Isaac suddenly realized that he loved her and he hoped that he lived through the next day to tell her so. “I aim to do just that.”

“I’ll see you in the morning, Isaac. Ma and I will make you a scrumptious breakfast.”

“I can’t wait.”

Isaac rode home on Dandy with a broad grin on his face. The outlaws could take everything from him, even his life. They couldn’t take the feeling in his heart that Abigail gave him.

Chapter 35

Isaac walked Dandy into the barn and found Annabelle wandering around. She was probably searching for some of her old friends who were all killed by the outlaws.

He felt bad for the bird because he promised her he would introduce her to a new flock. The lone survivor from his coop had grown on Isaac and he owed her a better life than the one she had – roaming around alone with no one to cluck to.

“I’m not going to get much sleep tonight, Annabelle. How about we go find you some friends. I happen to know some people who take real good care of their flock.”

Annabelle clucked.

“Boss, is that you talking to your animals again?”

“Abner is that you. Have you taken me up on my offer and decided to sleep in the barn?” Isaac said as he lifted his lantern to see his foreman.

“For the night at least. The roof in my shack leaks and it’s nice and dry here in the barn. If I heard right, you’re taking the chicken for an adventure. If I didn’t know you, I’d say you’re a little touched in

the head,” Abner said.

“Oh, I’m that for sure, Abner,” Isaac joked. “Care to join me? I’m going over to Hopewell to add Annabelle to their coop. I have a big day tomorrow and honestly, it might be my last. Wouldn’t want to leave the chicken alone.”

“You’re crazy for sure, Isaac but so am I, so it’s okay. On the way you can tell me about how you think you might meet your maker,” Abner said as he dropped from the loft and placed his hat on his head.

They walked along the path that took them to the back of the Hopewell farm. They walked over the remains of the Anders' crops, which made Isaac think of how merciless the outlaws were.

Who destroys a man's livelihood to make a point?

Isaac didn’t think being so cruel was a sign of strength. It was cowardice and he was determined to do something about it. Annabelle was clutched tightly in Isaac’s arm while Abner led the way with a lantern.

Isaac felt like he was a young boy back in Boston. He and his brothers used to create all kinds of hijinks late at night. They never broke the law but gave their mother fits.

“The coop is right next to the barn and I know the whole family is asleep in the house. I’m pretty sure we won’t run into anyone” Isaac said as he tried to avoid puddles and any tar that might still be sticky.

Isaac and Abner didn’t hear a thing before they were staring at the barrel of a rifle and a bright lantern. It was scary for sure but Isaac

didn't panic. He didn't sweat or act out either. He and Abner froze only because they were ordered to do so by the man holding the rifle.

"Isaac Curry is that you?" Leo asked. He slept in a back room in the barn. He was on high alert ever since the troubles with the outlaws started. "Abner, too?"

"It's us, Leo. Just out for a nighttime walk," Isaac said.

"Just out for a stroll? Carrying a chicken?" Leo asked and laughed a little because the situation was absurd.

"I'm not sure if you got wind of what we're attempting to do tomorrow?" Isaac asked as he held tight to the bird.

"I heard. Not a lot goes on around here that I don't know about. I've proved myself trustworthy over the years and they trust me with secrets. It doesn't explain what you and Abner are up to. I could've blown your head off," Leo said as he lowered his rifle.

"I knew I wouldn't sleep and needed something to do to pass the time. I have this one chicken that survived the outlaw's attack and she's special. Thought I'd place her in your coop."

"Sounds so bizarre that I believe you, Isaac. Throw your bird in with ours. If the outlaws come for the few livestock we have left around here, I'll be waiting and so will my rifle."

Isaac released the chicken in with the rest of the flock and she found a warm nest immediately. He kept his promise to Annabelle and now it was time to focus on the much more important promise he made to Abigail.

"I came here with Abner because I needed something to do other than pace back and forth. I would have worn a hole in the carpet by sun-up. I found out something truly amazing along the way."

What'd you find out, Boss?" Abner asked.

"I found out that I'm ready to take on George. I'm not scared of panicking at the sight of a rifle or the sound of gunshots. Leo, when you pointed the gun at my head I didn't panic or fall into an episode. I'm ready for George Bail," Isaac said.

"Sounds like this calls for a celebration," Leo said. He smiled and led Abner and Isaac into the barn.

Isaac smelled lavender because Abigail spent so much time in the barn doing chores. He found it impossible to go anywhere that didn't remind him of the green-eyed beauty.

Leo brought out a bottle of whiskey that he saved for special occasions. Isaac hoped that a few sips would allow him to sleep at least a couple of hours before he rode into town.

Isaac had to be as sharp as ever and not make a single mistake that would put Abigail or her family in trouble.

"I believe you can talk some sense into that scoundrel George. I'm planning to be at the post office with Joe, Len, and the others," Leo said.

"Me too, boss. If you don't mind me leaving the farm for a bit," Abner said.

"I don't mind at all," Isaac said. "The more I know about the people living in Humble Creek, the more I believe in defending the

place,” Isaac said.

They all raised a glass and finished what was in Leo’s small flask. Annabelle was delivered to her new family and Isaac got the sleep he needed before the plan got underway.

Isaac arrived in the kitchen of the Ander’s home just as Jane and Abigail were putting the finishing touches on breakfast.

An enormous platter of flapjacks with a plate of ham on the side was steaming in the center of the table. Jane insisted on saying a prayer before the meal and no one objected. Jane instructed everyone to clasp hands and bow heads.

“Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from Thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen.”

Jane continued on, asking that everyone be protected. She would have kept going if not for John clearing his throat loudly. Isaac and Abigail thought he was being rude but that was Uncle John.

After putting some delectable pancake into his mouth, Isaac chewed and then spoke. “Abigail, you should ride in first and tie up Nutmeg. I’d use the hitching post to the side of the general store to keep your horse out of danger and not make her too noticeable. Go inside and chat with Mrs. Landell and whoever happens to be about. Exit and stand behind the large oak. It will give you a clear view of what’s happening in front of the saloon. The road behind the general store will take you up into the hills. If things don’t work out – hop on Nutmeg and run. You know those hills and can hide out there for as long as you need to,” Isaac said.

"I'm impressed, Isaac," Abigail said. "I can see why you were a successful major in the Union Army."

"This is nothing because I've directed a company of men, one hundred strong. Thank you for the compliment. I was hoping you wouldn't consider me too bossy because I know you don't like being told what to do," Isaac said.

Abigail smiled. "It depends on who's doing the telling. I trust that the orders you give are for my own good."

"You're next John. Be sure to approach the saloon from behind. You're a big man and the outlaws will know who you are if they see you. I realize you're a brave man, but this family needs you so don't do anything on my account. You're no good to Jane and Abigail dead and I know you promised Ezra you'd keep them safe."

"I'm prepared to die for this family and this town. I'm not going to do anything stupid but if it happens, I'm ready. There will be peace in Humble Creek, whether I live to see it or not."

Abigail held back tears as she tried to leave. Isaac grabbed her arm. Abigail sat back down. "You might be ready to sacrifice yourself but I'm not ready to see you go."

John jumped into the conversation. "Come on, Abigail. We went over this yesterday. If you'd rather – stay home with your mother."

"Okay. I don't exactly like Isaac sacrificing himself for our safety but so be it," Abigail said.

Abigail wore a brown dress so she would in no way stand out and

her hair trailed down her back in a single braid. She was stoic when she left Hopewell farm.

“Keep your head low and don’t forget about my blue scarf. If I tug at it, head for the hills,” Isaac reminded Abigail before she left.

John was next. He looked ready to fight but Isaac reminded him that their plan didn’t include violence. He told Isaac he understood and he left for his spot behind the saloon.

Isaac climbed onto Dandelion, waved to Jane on the porch, and headed towards the center of town. He couldn’t lie to himself – he was nervous.

Who wouldn’t be, if they were riding toward their possible death. The wind was in his face as he galloped along the twisty road. Isaac relaxed. He knew he was doing the right thing.

The sky was threatening rain but so far it was dry. Isaac saw the sign for the town of Humble Creek and pulled up on the reins. Dandy slowed as they passed the sheriff’s office.

A deputy sat out front and as soon as he saw Isaac he ran inside. Probably to alert the sheriff. A short time later, another deputy ran across the street to the saloon. George and the outlaws knew by now he was coming.

The first bullet was so close that Isaac felt the breeze of it passing his cheek. The skills that he had learned in the war started coming back to Isaac. He was able to save his life then and he was saving his life this time too. The only difference this time – he didn’t draw his gun to return fire.

The bullets came from the saloon and a few from the sheriff’s

office. Isaac bobbed from left to right to avoid being hit. His reflexes were as fast as the bullets. Isaac ducked and he realized his luck wasn't going to last much longer so he had to do something.

Isaac Curry reached down and pulled his gun from its holster. He flipped it around and held it from the barrel. Isaac dropped his weapon to the ground, and it fell with a thud. He lifted his hands to show he was unarmed.

The shooting stopped and he could hear every breath taken as the town's folk responded in stunned silence. The men standing by the post office were in suspense with their mouths agape. They instinctively wanted to help Isaac, but they knew his plan. None of them wanted to put his scheme in jeopardy.

Isaac was stone cold scared, but he was holding his ground. He saw Abigail peek out from behind the big oak. From a distance, he could see the fear in her eyes. Isaac knew this was the only way he could remove that look from her face for good. Isaac didn't move as he waited for what seemed like hours.

The door to the saloon opened and George was preparing to step out.

Chapter 36

Abigail was terrified standing behind the big oak tree. She was watching the man for whom she cared so deeply, put his life on the line for her and the rest of the Anders family. Abigail had been biding her time in Humble Creek waiting for the right man to come along.

That man came and he was Isaac Curry. As she saw him bravely confronting the enemy, she trembled and shook. Isaac stirred feelings inside Abigail when he was near her and even when he was not – in her thoughts and dreams.

Her mother told of a stirring inside when she first laid eyes on her father Ezra Anders, but Abigail never thought it would happen to her. She knew then that she loved Isaac with all her heart and she would do anything for him.

Abigail was especially agitated because she wouldn't be able to hear what George and Isaac were saying. Isaac's eyes were no longer looking in Abigail's direction because they tracked George Bail as he approached.

She looked to the porch in front of the general store, which was raised off the ground. Abigail would be able to shimmy underneath on her belly and hear everything. She would have to fit in a space

two feet high, but she'd manage.

Abigail began to sprint when at that moment Mr. Landell came along with a hare over his shoulder. It looked like he had been hunting in the hills and came home with dinner.

He was oblivious as to what was happening. After everything Isaac had been through, Abigail refused to let him ruin everything.

Abigail mustered up all her strength and when Mr. Landell passed she pulled him behind the tree. The hare flew in the air, but Abigail managed to catch it and handed it back to Mr. Landell.

Mr. Landell started to open his mouth to yell at her, so Abigail put her finger to her mouth. He frowned. She whispered to Mr. Landell.

"You cannot speak, and you cannot go to the front entrance. Isaac Curry is trying to talk sense into George Bail, the lead outlaw. The situation is tense, and you must remain quiet. Go inside through the back and your wife will explain everything. Your view from the front window will be fine but stay down as much as possible. Those outlaws are dangerous, and they won't hesitate popping you through the window. You'll be deader than this hare."

Mr. Landell's eyes bulged and he nodded his head real slow. Sweat formed at his temples and he ran for the back door. Abigail was proud of herself for preventing disaster.

Abigail managed to scurry beneath the porch without any further mishaps. She could hear Dandy's breathing, so she knew she was close enough.

George approached Isaac and was within two feet when he started

speaking. "Are you on some sort of mission to die, Isaac," George said. Abigail could see Isaac's chest rise and fall with each breath. He was calm. She checked his eyes and they weren't wild. She knew the look of an episode well because Thomas had been that way on numerous occasions and Isaac wasn't having one.

"No, George. I was hoping not to die today, and I want to talk if you're willing. My gun is laying in the mud and I don't intend to pull anything funny," Isaac said as if he weren't speaking with a man who tried to kill him during the war and more recently too.

"You know it's not a conversation I want from you – it's Magnolia Hill Farm. You didn't have to go through all this just to sell me your land," George said.

"Let's forget about the land for a bit. Could we do that?" Isaac asked.

George nodded his head and motioned for his men to step back. Isaac was aware that they could pull off a shot and kill him in five seconds. "I'm listening, Isaac."

"We have a lot in common, George. The war got to us both because there's no way we could have come out unaffected. We saw our brothers in arms die – sometimes right next to us. Don't tell me you haven't felt an occasional pang of guilt that you survived and they didn't. I'm talking about the war in general and not our separate sides. Whether we wore the blue of the Union Army or the red of the Confederates, we suffered. Can you agree with that?" Isaac asked.

George reluctantly nodded his head.

"I don't think all of us turned to evil and thieving. I get that you

did because we had to turn somewhere. You turned to the outlaws because you were used to fighting for a cause and you found one. I bought myself a farm and became part of the Humble Creek community. I'm hoping you'll see our similarities and join me in building something good instead of threatening and thieving," Isaac said. "You get the same rush of accomplishment from good as evil.

"I don't see the similarities between us, Isaac. We both struggled during the war, but you came out with opportunities given to you. I didn't have that, so I turned to the outlaws because I had to take what wasn't handed to me," George said. He hadn't reached for his gun, which Abigail considered a step towards progress.

"I bet you had the nightmares. The ones where you can feel and smell the war. The ones where you feel like you're still being hunted like an animal. I had a bad one on the train coming to California – I felt like a fool and an outcast. I jumped and yelled as I scared my fellow passengers. No one around me understood what was going on. I heard gunfire not too far from here and it scared me. That was at the hands of your outlaws. I don't remember exactly what I did."

George nodded as if he knew exactly what Isaac was talking about. "I've been there. I had a real bad time of it back home in Georgia on my family's plantation. My Ma and Pa were so afraid of me that they kicked me out. I thought I'd be welcomed home a hero, but it wasn't that way. I was mean and mad when I made it to California – the outlaws suited me. Who was I to think I deserved any better?"

"You do deserve better, George. I respected you on the battlefield, even though you were the enemy. You were smart and a great planner. I'll never forget North Carolina when you plugged up my

company's only escape route. Wouldn't you like to put those skills to good use and instead of having folks fear you, respect you instead?"

"I know nothing about farming out west. My family owned a cotton plantation," George said.

Abigail thought George was turning to Isaac's way of thinking. "You'd be surprised how many of your skills back east can be used here. If you don't know how to do something, there are plenty of people willing to help. There's lots of room for you on the side of good and you'll like the folks of Humble Creek. I can't tell you how good the feeling is that you get after a long honest day's work. There's no more looking over your shoulder and you get to sleep in the same spot every night. It's tiring living like that. Instead you could be looking to find your place in society and Humble Creek is a place you're welcome. Lay down your weapon, George. The outlaws willing to follow you will be welcome. All that's required is a desire to work hard," Isaac said.

"Are you trying to trick me and have me thrown in jail? I wouldn't survive behind bars – I'd feel like a caged animal. I'd rather take a bullet. Have you been talking to Sheriff Fisk?" George asked.

"How would I do that when you've got the sheriff in your back pocket?" Isaac asked.

"Fisk wasn't hard to corrupt. Don't know why he was made sheriff of this town in the first place. He's got no backbone." George looked down at his boots as the rain started to fall.

"Please George. Lay down your weapon next to mine and help make Humble Creek better and not worse," Isaac pleaded.

Abigail could feel the tension in the town. All eyes were upon Isaac and George. You could hear a pin drop.

Abigail thought of what her life would be like if Isaac was unable to convince George to put down his gun. Isaac would end up leaving because all his opportunities in California would have dried up. Abigail, Uncle John, and her mother would be forced to move to the city.

They wouldn't be able to keep food on the table in Humble Creek and they would have to get jobs. Abigail would miss the fresh air, flowers, and farm animals, which she had grown fond of. George sure was taking his time answering Isaac's plea and Abigail's legs began to cramp.

From inside the general store, she heard the Landells talking about the situation underway.

"I fear this is the last chance for Humble Creek. If Isaac Curry can't pull this off then I doubt anyone can," Mrs. Landell said. "I saw him the day he came to Humble Creek and although I was rude to him then, I saw a determination in his eyes. He was here to make a life for himself and he was just what this town needed. He gives me hope for future generations – especially if he takes Abigail Anders for a wife. They make a powerful force."

Abigail smiled from below the porch. It was something that crossed her mind more than once. Abigail Curry sounded nice, she smiled when the thought crossed her mind.

"I agree but I think George and the outlaws are bad to the bone. It'll surprise me if Isaac makes it out alive. Next, they'll handle that innocent Thomas Anders. Jane won't survive a loss like that and who knows what'll happen with Abigail and John." Mr. Landell

said.

“Pa,” Martha said in a scolding manner. “Don’t you dare speak in such a horrible manner. I’m in love with Thomas Anders and I won’t stand for your hurtful talk. I always knew he would make it home from the war and back to me.”

Abigail smiled despite Mr. Landell’s prediction. Things had to turn around because Thomas’s happiness was within reach. Abigail hardly knew Martha Landell when she and Thomas were courting. Now, she looked forward to getting to know the loyal and intelligent lady.

The look on George’s face was softening and he looked ready to lay down his gun. He did the same as Isaac by removing it from its holster and holding it by the barrel. George leaned down to place it in the mud next to Isaac’s gun.

Abigail moved from her space under the porch. She was ready to cheer with the rest of the good citizens of Humble Creek. In her mind, Abigail was thinking about where to run first. Did she go to the jail to welcome Thomas back to freedom or to Isaac? The plan couldn't have worked better, and she imagined Uncle John was bursting with joy also.

Abigail heard Mrs. Landell call out Isaac’s name at the same time one of the outlaws raised his gun. Smoke billowed out from the barrel of the gun as the man shot it and sneered. Abigail screamed.

Before she could free herself from under the porch, her time with Isaac flashed before her eyes. There was their first meeting on the twisty road when he knew no one in Humble Creek. He didn’t know the way to Magnolia Farm and now it was his home.

Abigail recalled all their times racing horses and their ride up the hill. Mostly Abigail recalled the way Isaac made her feel from the moment their bodies touched when he held her the day she fell off the horse.

All the good memories came flooding back in an instant. Anything negative faded into the background. Abigail couldn't imagine never feeling Isaac's warm touch again.

Chapter 37

George stood up from placing his weapon on the ground

next to Isaac's. The tension between them was rapidly melting and it felt like a curtain was being lifted to reveal the beauty and possibilities of Humble Creek.

Isaac was enjoying the moment when he heard a blast coming from a gun. He could see the look on the outlaw's face – it was one of sinister intentions and satisfaction. Mrs. Landell yelled his name at the same time.

As the shot rang out, so did Abigail's sharp piercing scream. Isaac was unwilling to have things end this way. Abigail would not soon recover from seeing him shot dead on the streets of Humble Creek.

Isaac pulled up on Dandy and swerved so he just missed the bullet. He almost fell to the ground but saved himself by grabbing Dandelion's silky mane. "Sorry, buddy. I would have looked pretty silly falling in the mud as the entire town looks on." Isaac thought it was over when he heard a second gunshot ring out. Either it came from the same outlaw or he had inspired others to take Isaac out.

They were trying to impress George and perhaps he knew they would come to his aid. By laying down his gun, George created a

distraction for his scoundrel men to get in place and deliver the final shot to Isaac Curry. George Bail outsmarted him again.

To think that Isaac escaped being shot at more times than he could count during the war, only to die in Humble Creek California. If this was the end, at least he spent the last year of his life with Abigail.

From the first time she galloped to his rescue on the twisty road to the many times they raced and the way she opened her heart to him. He could see her in his mind's eye, clutching the dandelion as proof that there was hope for Magnolia Hill Farm.

Isaac never wanted to die with regrets, now his only one was that he wouldn't spend more days with Abigail. He'd regret that he never told Abigail that he loved her.

Isaac raised his head to the man who first shot him. He wanted the man who took him out to have to look him in the eye. Isaac wanted to haunt the man's dreams for years to come.

The man wasn't there – it must have been the end because his eyes were playing tricks on him. Isaac looked a second time and the man who shot him was on the ground. He was shot and it couldn't have been Isaac who shot him because he wasn't carrying a weapon.

Isaac looked back and saw George holding his revolver and he realized that it was him. George had picked up his gun from the ground and shot the outlaw who tried to take out Isaac.

George smiled and shrugged his shoulders as he approached Isaac. He had picked up his gun off the ground to shoot the outlaw but as a show of faith, let it fall to the ground again.

"You made me an offer to join something good and I couldn't let you go dying on me." George offered his outstretched hand and the two men shook in front of everyone. Thunderous applause, whoops and hollers rang out. Everyone in Humble Creek cheered and embraced each other.

"Not sure thank you is the right thing to say when a man kills another, but I find myself pretty darn grateful right now," Isaac said. He was still reeling from seeing his life play before his eyes.

"I thought taking memories with me when I left the battlefield was a sign of weakness. I couldn't shake the nightmares and I'd have tremors out of nowhere. I thought I was alone and not deserving to be around good people. Then I saw folks lining up to support you and that cry of anguish coming from the girl. If that doesn't prove her love – don't know what would. That was the scream of someone you love being shot at. I realized I wanted people to think of me that way and not fear me," George said.

"I haven't had a good night's sleep in years and for the first time in a long time – that's possible. I've spent way too much time living on the wrong side of the law." George's features softened and he looked like a nice person who was capable of good deeds.

Isaac couldn't believe he was having a civil conversation with his enemy. "George, I'm curious, where'd you take our cattle? Are they alive?"

George smiled. "Yes, sir and I can't wait for you to take them off my hands. My men were good at wrangling and rustling but they don't know what to do with the cattle now that we have them. The criminals that I have following me are not the most capable men I've run into."

"It would be really nice if you and I could ride the cattle back to their rightful owners. I know the gesture would be appreciated. It would be nice to work for the same cause for a change," Isaac said. He looked around and saw criminals gathered in front of the saloon. They all had loaded guns in their hands. "George, I think we have a problem. How loyal is your gang of criminals?"

George looked at Isaac. "Uh, they're criminals and they'd sell their ma if the price was right."

Isaac saw Abigail on her way, so he put his hand up. He didn't want her in the crosshairs until things were completely settled. "I have an idea. As long as you're willing to see some of your friends scatter."

"They aren't really friends so what's your plan," George was willing to listen. Isaac whispered a few words in George's ear and cleared his throat as he prepared to talk to the outlaws who were in his gang. "I just got word from Isaac here that a U.S. Marshall will be here soon and he's bringing a few dozen men along with him. Any of you who want to stay behind with me and make a go at living life within the law, are welcome to do so. Any of you that wants to keep living the outlaw life should leave now. It won't be pretty when the marshal comes because I hear he's up for promotion and if he cleans up Humble Creek, he'll get what he wants."

"How do we know you're telling the truth, George. You turned on us today and why should we trust you?" A rather mean-looking man asked.

"I invite you all to stay and find out," George said.

"I'm fixing to stay by your side, George."

“Me too,” Another man said as he shoved his gun into his holster.

“I’m tired of being bad and having people glare at me. I’m staying too.”

Four more outlaws pledged their loyalty to George. They agreed to stick around Humble Creek and help repair the damage that they caused. After the work was done they would return to their families and try to rebuild their lives. Some men spit on the ground and said a few choice words before taking off.

A shot rang out as the last criminal left town followed by a howl. It was Uncle John and he was shot. George was the first one to his side with Isaac close behind.

“John, are you hurt bad?” Isaac asked.

“Nah. It’s my leg but I haven’t missed a day in the field in years and if this injury lays me up for a while – so be it. I deserve some time off and once I get this bullet carved out, I’ll be fine.

“Do you trust this George character, Isaac?” John asked.

“I believe that like me he’s tired of fighting. Not to say we won’t disagree, but problems don’t need to be settled with guns. Yeah, John, I trust him.”

George and Isaac went around to each former outlaw to look them in the eye and make them promise they were done with thieving.

Many of them were young confused boys who turned to a life of crime because there was nothing else to do. They wanted to get out and now they finally had the chance.

The rain stopped and the clouds parted. Humble Creek survived

although it would take time and effort for it to become whole again.

“I’m going to talk to Sheriff Fisk about letting his prisoner free. Thomas Anders won’t have to spend another night in hell. He’s a strong man and he deserves my sincere apologies. I’m going to help repair the damage done by my gang but then I’m going home to Georgia,” George said.

“There’s a girl back there and I wonder if she’ll still have me after all the bad I’ve done. I didn’t think it was possible until I saw how Abigail stood by you. From the look in those green eyes of hers, I don’t think there’s a thing she wouldn’t do for you.”

“I’m a lucky man, George. I wouldn’t have thought a woman like Abigail Anders would give me a second look. I don’t see why your sweetheart won’t do the same,” Isaac said.

“I don’t know what you’re waiting for – go get her.”

Isaac walked towards the general store where Mrs. Landell was placing a bandage around John's leg and he was drinking whiskey to ease his pain.

He had a broad grin on his face, so Isaac thought the alcohol was doing a good job. John deserved the pampering and rest – he had devoted his life to saving Hopewell Farm. He took the mantle of patriarch over when his brother left and filled the role admirably.

Abigail was laughing over a joke or humorous story John told. Her mouth was wide open and her head back. Abigail’s golden hair was free and blowing in the gentle breeze. She was happy and Isaac didn’t want her to be anything but – ever.

She was the light of Isaac's life, the love of his life and he could not allow another day to pass without telling her exactly how he felt.

Chapter 38

Abigail couldn't stop laughing as John told his story. She had never seen him drink much and he was getting carried away. Abigail was laughing so hard, tears were streaming down her face and she held her belly because it hurt from cackling.

Suddenly Abigail spotted Thomas standing in the doorway of the jail and he was free. Abigail raced towards her brother. She threw her arms around her brother. "Did they injure you? Are you starving? Have you had nightmares or episodes?" Abigail asked.

"I'm fine, Abigail. I have to tell you about our sheriff. He's not very good at his job because he's too soft. He acted all tough out at the farm but when he got me behind bars he didn't know what to do with me. The deputies who were really just outlaws left for the evening and I was alone with Sheriff Fisk. He told me stories about being teased as a kid and the memories came back when Leo came to visit. Leo knew all about it and it turns out Fisk would wet his pants when he got nervous."

"How did Leo know?" Abigail asked.

"Leo was married to Bill Fisk's Pa's sister, Marjorie. Leo is his uncle through marriage. Leo used to try and help Bill and he was one of the few folks left in Humble Creek that knew his secret. Bill

worked hard to get a tough reputation and Leo threatened him so that he would allow you in. Then, Bill found out I was war sick and asked for my help stopping the nightmares and flashbacks. It wasn't war but in a way, he was fighting his own battles with those bullies. That kind of teasing must be more painful than either of us can imagine. We became friends. He brought me food and even allowed Martha to come to visit on occasion. Martha Landell brought me light when I was trapped in a terrible place."

"I don't care why Bill Fisk treated you like an honored guest. I'm just happy to have you back. Isaac convinced George and the outlaws to lay down their guns." Abigail said. "Humble Creek is a safe place to live again and we can begin working to get Hopewell farm back to its former glory," Abigail exclaimed. She finally let go of her brother and she saw him craning his neck. He was probably keeping his eyes peeled for Martha Landell.

"Isaac Curry is the hero of this town and my personal hero," Thomas said. "If he hadn't come to Humble Creek when he did, it would have been taken over by criminals and I would have been dead or close to it. The word survivor echoes through my mind when I'm feeling like I might spiral out of control. He showed me out of a dark place and made it possible for me to be with the lovely Martha. If I ever have a son – I'm naming him Isaac."

"Ma is waiting at the farm. I think you should be the one to tell her how things worked out. She hasn't been the same since her boy was dragged away to jail." Abigail said. "Ma has been through it all and her faith has never wavered. Imagine seeing your son and husband go off to war. Then father returns, only to leave again. We can't forget to celebrate Ma for never letting us give up hope."

"What about Uncle John?" Thomas asked. "I thought he'd be right behind you, so he could congratulate me on gaining my freedom. I

know he never thought he'd see the day. He has always been tough on me but I deserved it."

"He was shot, not too bad. He took a bullet to the leg and if you ask me, he's proud of the injury. He likes all the attention and whiskey they're giving him at the general store."

Thomas chuckled. "I'll go to Ma and wait at the farm for everyone else. Bring Martha along with you and tell her I went home to my Ma."

Thomas took off and Abigail looked at the mob of well-wishers gathered around Isaac. It was a far cry from when he first came to Humble Creek.

He was brushed off by everyone he approached because they thought perhaps he was an outlaw. Abigail was his last chance when she charged up behind him. Isaac would say he was lucky, but she felt like she was the lucky one.

Abigail was letting Isaac enjoy being treated as the town hero. Everyone wanted to shake his hand and personally thank him. Abigail hadn't seen so many citizens in the town center since she was a young girl. Even the saloon threw open its doors and let the light in.

Children were running free again. For years now, parents were afraid to let their children off their land. The school closed down last year because the students were afraid to walk to school as it required them to pass the saloon. The saloon belonged to the outlaws as it served as their base. It was where George Bail held court.

Isaac said he was going to do something and got it done. Not a lot

of people did that, but Isaac wasn't like everyone else. Abigail was standing next to Nutmeg who was tied up next to the general store.

Isaac finished shaking the last hand and then looked around, searching for someone.

Isaac's clear eyes stopped when they met Abigail's green gaze. He was alive and he was showing no signs of panic. The edges of his mouth curled up into the widest grin Abigail had ever seen displayed on his face.

She smiled back and picked up her dress, dirty from laying on the ground under the porch of the general store, and sprinted towards Isaac who did the same. Isaac spread his arms. Abigail couldn't run into them fast enough. It felt like she had to run miles to reach him.

Isaac plucked Abigail off the ground and twirled her around. Then Uncle John, the Landells, and the men at the post office cheered because they knew how together they had helped save Humble Creek.

Neither one could have succeeded without the other. Abigail's brain and intuition were matched only by Isaac's.

"I'd ask if you're injured but with a hug like this, I know you've never been better. I've never seen such bravery, Isaac. You really know how to scare a woman – my stomach was in knots the entire time," Abigail said. "Do you know what it's like to have your life flash before your eyes," Abigail said. "I didn't recall any of the sour memories, those faded away and I was only left with sweet visions of you and me. I can't believe I wasted time thinking anything but the best when it concerned you."

Isaac held Abigail back so he could see her face.

"As a matter of fact, Abigail, I do know what it's like to have your life flash before your eyes. I managed to avoid the gunshots when I entered the town and thought that was enough. I twisted and turned my body to avoid them bullets in ways that I didn't think possible. When I was shot at after talking to George – I thought that was the end for sure. George Bail had gotten the best of me and I thought he'd be celebrating. By the time I heard the next shot, I was ready to go to meet my maker and all I could think about was you, Abigail. I had one regret, well two. One was that I didn't spend enough time with you and that I wouldn't get to spend more time with you. The second regret was that I neglected to tell you I love you, Abigail Anders. I love you and I think I have for a long time. I thought back to the day you helped me out before we even knew each other – I loved you then. Perhaps I didn't know what it was I was feeling because I've never felt it before. I never want to live without that feeling or you again."

"Isaac, I should have stayed by your side. I should have always stayed by your side and never doubted your commitment. I questioned your motives and accused you of abandoning your wife and children."

Isaac chuckled. "I had none – silly."

"I know and I should have allowed you to explain before I jumped down your throat. I was wrong to think you were anything like my father after the war. My wounds were still wide open when you came to town, Isaac. I was left before, and I expected you to do the same. I took my pain out on you." Abigail was slightly flustered – odd for Abigail Anders. "Now I see you who you are – a man of integrity. I love you and like you said, I probably have for a long time."

Isaac dropped his hat to the ground and took Abigail's face in his hands and kissed her deeply and passionately. Neither of them cared much who was watching. The loud cheers around were ignored because as far as Abigail and Isaac were concerned, they were the only ones on earth.

Jane, Uncle John, Thomas, Martha, Abigail, and Isaac gathered on the front porch at Hopewell farm. It had been a long but successful day. They were enjoying the glow of a magnificent California sunset and they were all exactly where they wanted to be.

"Thomas and Martha went for a walk and everyone is exhausted. Let's meet back here in the morning for breakfast," Jane said. "I cook when I worry and after today, I have enough cobbler and tea cakes to feed an army. I'll serve up a breakfast none of you will soon forget."

"Sounds like a wonderful idea, Jane. I should be getting back to Magnolia Hill to make sure Abner heard the good news," Isaac said.

"I'll walk you down the path." Abigail grasped Isaac's hand as they walked. You could feel the calmness in the air. In one day Abigail had gone from worrying about everything to looking forward to everything. The stars had come out, and a perfect sliver of moon hung in the sky. Even the crickets and the night owls seemed relaxed. "What will tomorrow bring, do you suppose?" Abigail asked.

"I don't know and that's a beautiful thing. It doesn't matter what happens tomorrow or the next day because I'll have the woman I love by my side. I've been waiting for this feeling my whole life,

but I didn't know what I was looking for until I met you. Now that I have you – I'll never let you go. Are you ready for that?"

"Oh yes," Abigail said as she leaned in and kissed Isaac on the cheek. "I'm ready. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yes, you will. I love you, Abigail."

"I love you, Isaac."

Chapter 39

John was alone on the porch when Isaac arrived. Isaac couldn't have planned it better because he wanted to talk to John alone. Uncle John was drunk the night before, which wouldn't be appropriate for a serious discussion.

It rained overnight so it was a fresh, dewy morning – Abigail's favorite type of day. The lavender and rosemary plants let off their most fragrant scents after the rain.

"Is Abigail inside helping Jane?" Isaac asked John who was elevating his leg. A doctor from a neighboring town was due to visit Humble Creek within a few days. He'd be able to check John's leg.

"What's on your mind, Isaac? You look nervous and I can't guess why unless there's another gang of outlaws I don't know about," John said.

"No, sir..."

John interrupted. "You've never called me sir – What's happening here?" John asked – his interest was piqued.

"Abigail's Pa isn't here, and I consider you his stand-in." Isaac

cleared his throat. "I love Abigail and she loves me too, John. You said to me a long time ago that Abigail can't be with a weak man and I agree. I've proved myself as a man of strength and I'd like your permission to marry your niece. Please."

John laughed. "Welcome to the family Isaac. If Abigail accepts, I'd gladly give you her hand in marriage. Although she's never needed my permission to do whatever she wants." John chuckled again.

Isaac let out a sigh of relief just as Abigail showed up in the doorway wearing a light blue dress that he'd never seen before. "What's the sigh all about?" Abigail asked.

"Oh, nothing. You look lovely in that dress – it's the color of the sky," Isaac gushed.

"Thank you. I ruined many dresses with tar, mud, and one I tore up to use as a bandage. Ma worked on this without my knowing and it's my new favorite dress. I hope you're all hungry. Ma outdid herself," Abigail said as she straightened her straw hat. "Are you feeling okay, Isaac?" She asked.

Isaac was more nervous than he had been when he was being chased by a pack of outlaws. "Do we have a few minutes before breakfast to take a short stroll?"

"Yes, I'll let Ma know." Abigail skipped inside.

The situation was amusing to John who himself had never married because he never had the chance.

The breeze was blowing and the dogwood leaves shook as they walked down the path hand in hand. Isaac stopped and looked deep into Abigail's eyes. "I don't know the right way to ask this

question, so I'm just going to come out and say it. Abigail Anders will you be my wife?" Isaac felt ready to fall over and the few seconds Abigail took to answer felt like an eternity.

"Yes, Isaac. I would be proud to."

Abigail ran back to the house dragging Isaac by the hand. He jokingly called out as he was barely remaining on his feet. "Is this what being married to you is going to be like?"

"A wild run with an optimistic woman?" Abigail joked. "Why yes. Yes, it is."

They arrived laughing, smiling, and out of breath. John knew what had just happened and the others could guess.

"This beautiful woman has just agreed to be my wife," Isaac said as he kissed his soon to be wife on the cheek. "We have a wedding to plan and I think it needs to happen quickly before Abigail comes to her senses and changes her mind. I'm thinking next weekend – any objections?"

"No one would dare object. I'll never change my mind - that will never happen, Isaac. I love you and always will. No more looking across the way to see if the light was on in your house because I'm going to be by your side for the rest of my days," Abigail said.

"You looked to check if there was a light on in my house?" Isaac asked.

"Yes, and I hoped it wouldn't be because I wanted to make sure you were sleeping."

"My sleepless nights are behind me, Abigail, because of you."

The family sat down to a breakfast that lasted through lunchtime. Martha, Abner, and Leo sat with the family because they too had been there to help rid Humble Creek of the criminal element. Everyone deserved a proper thank you.

They would all be important in bringing Hopewell and Magnolia Hill back to life. Abner and Leo stayed on when times were tough, even when they weren't receiving pay.

They deserved to receive congratulations and extra pay when the farms became profitable again. Martha brought apples and mincemeat pies from the general store and Leo had been busy at the smokehouse. John ate a plateful of bacon at least and plenty of Jane's cobbler as well.

"The hens are laying better than ever since Annabelle came to stay," Leo commented. He forgot that Isaac's late night visit to the coop was a secret.

"Who is Annabelle?" John asked.

"Annabelle is my chicken – the only one who survived and she was lonely. One night, I knew I wouldn't sleep, so I dragged Abner over to your place. I figured Annabelle needed a new home and it turned out great," Isaac said apologetically.

Everyone had a good laugh about Isaac's close relationship with a chicken. He had to admit he took it a bit far, but it showed what a devoted father he'd be in the future.

Isaac never spoke to Abigail about how many children she wanted, and Isaac hoped it was many. The conversation was on the table and he hoped Abigail would pick up on it.

“I should have asked before I agreed to marry you or at least asked in private – do you want a lot of children, Isaac?” Abigail asked.

“I want as many as God blesses us with and I hope it numbers in the double digits. We have two farms to run.” Isaac smiled.

“In that case, I think 12 is a good round number. Let’s try for that.” Abigail pecked Isaac on the cheek.

“I hope the girls look just like you,” Isaac said.

“I hope the boys look like you.” Abigail beamed.

Jane, who was sitting at the head of the table, shed a tear.

"Ma," Thomas said. "Is everything okay?"

“You and your sister are so strong. Together we have made it through lean times and I’m just sorry your father isn’t here to see what we created. This small family has blossomed into something beautiful and I couldn’t be more proud. Of course, John.” Jane turned to her brother. “We couldn’t have done any of this without you. To answer your question, Thomas, everything is okay, and my tears are ones of joy.”

"Ma," Thomas said, "you give credit to everyone but yourself and that's wrong. You have been the pillar of strength we've all relied upon. You've prayed, cooked, and taught us how to be the people we've become. I came back from the war, a shell of my former self and you let me back in. That took more love and patience than most have. You say we're all strong, but we wouldn't be if you hadn't been the guiding force in our lives."

“Abigail is in my life because of you, Jane. You helped teach her to

become the woman that she is – the woman I love. I should also mention, you make the best cobbler west of the Mississippi,” Isaac said. He reached across the table and grasped the matriarch’s hand.

"Thank you, Isaac, but who makes better cobbler east of the Mississippi?" Jane asked with a smile.

"That would be my mother – God rest her soul." Isaac laughed and he was joined by everyone.

The Anders family had forgotten what it was like to relax. They proved that by sticking together there were no limits to what they could accomplish.

Jane would be able to stop worrying for a change and safely resume going to church on Sundays. Worrying, however, was what she did best, and Jane had a wedding to plan which would include the entire town of Humble Creek.

“What’s happening?” Isaac asked as he saw the exact opposite of what happened the night the cattle were stolen. Dust swirled, water splattered, and the loud splash of hooves in the mud was deafening. George was leading a herd of cattle back to Magnolia Hill and Hopewell.

“Get on your horse, Abner. We’re going to have to help because these wranglers don’t look like they know what they’re doing,” Isaac ordered.

Thomas and Leo jumped in to help too. Abigail ran to hop on Nutmeg and Isaac smiled, knowing that she knew more about herding cattle than he did.

“Let’s go get our cattle back,” Abigail said excitedly.

Isaac felt proud to have such a woman for his fiancée. Abigail was determined and capable – nothing was going to stop her from doing what she knew was right. Most of the cattle belonged to Hopewell Farm but they weren't keeping track.

They were branded so they'd eventually work it out. George Bail had the most fun because he was doing something good for a change. Isaac told him it would feel amazing and George didn't believe it until now. Isaac pulled Dandy up alongside George. "I didn't expect to get the cattle back so soon," Isaac said.

"I want to make things right here in Humble Creek so I can head back to Georgia and restart my life. Haven't stopped thinking about the woman I left behind," George said. "Even shaved my mustache because I think it made me look wicked," he joked.

"I hope you'll be around next Saturday because there's going to be a celebration in town and a wedding too," Isaac said.

"Who's getting married?" George asked as if he didn't know.

"Me and Abigail – at last. Been wanting to put a ring on her finger since the day I met her."

"You fought hard Isaac and I respect that. You deserve every bit of happiness that comes your way."

George smiled and rode off in search of any stragglers.

Leo came to visit and gave Isaac the ring that belonged to his late wife Marjorie. Isaac discovered that Marjorie had green eyes like Abigail, so the gold band had a small green stone.

It had been lucky for them because they were married for many years. Leo said that Marjorie would have been happy that a woman with a spirit like Abigail would have it.

Martha and Thomas built an arch for the brief ceremony. They wrapped the arch in ivy, lavender, and daisies. Also included was a single dandelion.

They said their simple vows in front of a minister who had known Abigail since she was a baby. Abigail wore a lace dress with green accents made by Jane.

She had been working on the dress for a long time in hopes that her daughter would marry someday. Isaac wore a clean shirt and bowtie borrowed from Mr. Landell.

Jane cried and the citizens of Humble Creek cheered as Abigail and Isaac were introduced as husband and wife.

Isaac brought Abigail to a quiet spot beneath an elm tree. "Are you happy?"

"More than ever, Isaac. I didn't know it was possible to be this happy. You've made all my dreams come true."

"I'm just getting started Abigail. I have the rest of my life to make you happy."

They kissed passionately with the setting sun as their backdrop, while their friends and family celebrated.

Epilogue

Eight Months Later

Abigail teetered down the path lined with small but growing magnolia trees. Abner and Leo planted saplings and relocated some larger trees, as a wedding present to Isaac and Abigail. They were growing beautifully as was their soon to be born child growing in Abigail's belly.

Isaac and Abigail wasted no time working on their goal of having 12 children. Abigail was thinking of amending that number after pregnancy took so much of her energy. She was used to having boundless energy from morning until night.

Jane told her after she had the baby, Abigail would miss being with child and be in the family way again before she knew it. Abigail doubted that but she had been wrong before.

Abigail arrived at the Anders family front porch and found John sitting in the rocker. "Leo said you needed to speak with me, Uncle John. Did you consider coming to see me – I am eight months along." Abigail patted her belly. "Isaac won't allow me to ride anymore. He tried earlier on and I agreed that I would no longer ride when I couldn't get up on Nutmeg without assistance.

Mounting her is definitely no longer a possibility."

"My leg is still giving me fits," John said. "You do remember that I took a bullet." He never neglected to remind people of his heroics.

Abigail laughed. "It's been eight months since you were shot. The doctor said you shouldn't suffer consequences from the injury. I've seen you working in the fields and running cattle."

He smiled.

"I'm fine. But I wanted to talk to you privately. I'm leaving Humble Creek and I wanted you to hear it from me, Abigail. Stories get twisted when you hear them from someone else. I didn't want you to think I was being pushed out."

John was leaving Humble Creek because his reason for coming was to save the family from losing the farm. Since Isaac and Abigail were married things had turned around and both farms were in the black. He wanted to get out of the way, and he was itching to return to San Francisco.

"They have a job at the livery waiting for me. I was their best farrier and they're happy to have me back. Had a friend pass through and he told me. I can shoe a horse faster than anyone in the city," John said proudly. "Also, I was thinking that taking a wife wouldn't be a bad idea. Maybe I'll get me one mail ordered."

"I'm happy that you're going back to the place you love but... you'll be missed," Abigail said as she wiped away a tear. Lately, Abigail seemed to cry more often than she was used to. She had found a dead bird yesterday and cried about it for twenty minutes. "I guess one never knows what the future holds."

“I’m leaving soon, and I’ll be sure to stop by the house and say farewell. I have to see Isaac before I go. Have you given any thought to naming it John if it’s a boy?”

“You’ll have to talk to Isaac about that. You won’t be waiting until the baby comes?” Abigail asked.

“Nah, I’m too much of a softie and if I meet the nipper, I’ll want to stay,” John said. He stood to give his niece a hug although he could barely wrap his arms around her.

Abigail made it back to the barn and put the painting supplies she needed into the wheelbarrow. As she took the paintbrush in her hand she thought back to the last time she painted a sign.

Abigail hardly knew Isaac when she grabbed the blue paint and started to outline the capital M. The Magnolia Hill Farm sign stood for long enough and now was time to replace it.

She knew back then that there was something special about Isaac, but Abigail never imagined then that she’d be married to him. Well, maybe deep down inside she hoped it but in her most magical dreams, Abigail couldn't have seen this coming.

Abigail called out to Isaac who was busy in the wood-shop making a cradle. Abigail was unsure if he'd be finished in time. Isaac insisted on making it perfect with rounded corners, so the baby didn't get scratched.

He wanted to engrave it with the initials LC for Ladd Curry. If it was a boy, they agreed to name him Ladd after Isaac's oldest brother who died during the war.

Abigail reminded him that they might have a girl, so he held off on the engraving. "Thomas and I are fixing to paint the sign. Come join us because it represents the hard work we've done," Abigail said. She wore a pink dress Jane made and Isaac said she had never looked more beautiful.

"I'll be there. By the time you make it to the sign I'll be finished with the cradle," Isaac joked. He was referring to Abigail's waddle, which she took as a good-natured jab that she'd return later.

"There you are, Thomas. It's hard to believe that a year ago you were frail and skinny. Those overalls were falling off you and now they're almost too small. You do realize that you are a part of this as much as Isaac and me. Your recovery inspired us to make Humble Creek a safe place. Did you hear about John's plans to leave?"

"I did and it doesn't surprise me because John came to Humble Creek as a favor to our parents. When Pa and I left for the war, we needed someone to oversee Hopewell farm. You and Ma needed the help and Isaac had yet to come along. I think we forgot that he had a life of his own in San Francisco."

"Yeah, he deserves a little happiness too," Abigail said as she arched her sore back. Carrying extra weight in front wasn't easy. "Speaking of happy, Martha did a beautiful job on the sign. I had no problem coming up with the design, but the beautiful script was her doing. You have a special lady Thomas," Abigail said. She was hinting of a marriage proposal coming soon but she knew Thomas worked on his own schedule. It was clear he loved Martha and the feeling was mutual; it would only be a matter of time.

"The forest green color you chose is perfect, Abigail. Heads are going to turn when folks pass by and see the new name," Thomas

said. "How'd you come up with the name for the ranch?"

"A new name seemed appropriate when we merged the two farms. Isaac and I laid awake at night choosing the right name. New Hope Ranch sounded perfect as soon as I said it out loud."

Abigail was putting the finishing touches on the sign with the green paint when Isaac appeared behind her. He wrapped his arms around her. As they looked at the new sign, they had tears in their eyes. They were filled with new hope for the future and had worked hard to be where they were.

As they looked at the land ready to be planted, they breathed a sigh of relief. It was looking to be a prosperous year and already merchants were signing up to buy their wheat and corn.

The cattle were healthy and increasing in number thanks to the prize bulls they received from Mr. Keller years ago. Leo talked of the need for a new barn someday to accommodate the increasing number of pigs and chickens.

"Thomas, with John leaving, that leaves you in charge of the house. If Jane wants, she's welcome to come over and live with us," Isaac mentioned. "I expect she'll be at our house a lot, anyway with the new baby."

"I think Ma will be happy staying where she is. No one is going to drag her away from that kitchen that she's grown to love through the years. She has everything where she wants, and the place is home. When I get married, I'm sure she'll be fine – I'll welcome the help with my family," Thomas said. "I meant to say if I get married."

Abigail laughed. "You forget, as your sister, I know everything

you're thinking – sometimes before you do. I predict marriage in your future and it's obvious who the lucky lady will be."

Thomas smiled. "I'm going to leave the two of you be, while I go into town. I'm going to see about getting some work at the general store. I think it will do good to have an extra income until harvest time when I'll have to spend all my time at New Hope Ranch."

Abigail knew her brother didn't need extra income. "I think you just want an excuse to spend more time with Martha." Abigail laughed and a funny look came over her face. She felt a sharp twinge.

Isaac was sitting on the ground and he bounced up. Thomas looked concerned. "Abigail, is the baby coming? Is it time?"

"Should I fetch Ma?" Thomas asked.

"No, no. It was a cramp from eating too fast. The two of you are going to drive me crazy. Relax."

Isaac relaxed. "The two of us can handle being crazy – we have the experience," Isaac joked. He was joined in laughter by Abigail and Thomas.

Thomas went into town while Isaac and Abigail slowly walked to their bench under the willow tree. They were enjoying their last days together before a new kind of chaos was underway. They couldn't wait to be parents and weren't worried about their lives being upended. As long as they were together, they could handle anything that came their way.

Abigail was in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on breakfast as Isaac did the same with the baby cradle he was working on.

It was another beautiful California day and Abigail looked forward to getting chores completed before the baby came. She had to be sure the house was swept, begin making jam, and finish canning the last blueberries.

The plants were heavy with fruit and she looked forward to making muffins and flapjacks with the scrumptious berries. There was so much to do and so little time to get everything done.

Abigail had no idea how her mother did it. The thought had barely escaped Abigail's mind when a sharp pain ran the length of her belly. She leaned against it, breathing through the pain.

"Well," Abigail thought. "Guess it's time."

Abigail went looking for Isaac and found Abner.

He was passing by the kitchen and she called out to him.

"Abner. Looks like this baby's coming. Get Isaac to ride over to my Ma's house and bring her back here at once," Abigail said.

"Yes, ma'am." Abner nodded like a soldier receiving orders from his general.

Abigail tidied up as she waited for her ma to arrive. Then she realized that maybe the baby wasn't going to wait for her ma to get here. She went to her bedroom and spread some old sheets on the bed, staying calm like her ma had said to.

The pains didn't last long before she felt the urge to push. When her ma came in a half hour later, she was already sitting up in bed and holding a baby in her arms.

"My sweet, Abigail. I can't believe you managed this on your own." Jane paused, cleared her throat and called louder than Abigail imagined her mother was capable of. "Isaac Curry, get in here. You have a son." Jane turned back to Abigail and Ladd.

She cut the cord and cleaned the child in the basin before wrapping him in a kitchen towel and handing him to his Ma.

Isaac rushed in and sat gently on the bed next to his wife and son. "I thought you were making dinner," Isaac joked. "You did good Abigail. Ladd Michael Sam Curry is the first child born on New Hope Ranch."

"He's perfect just like his pa. Your brothers would be proud that you named your first son after them. I get to choose the name for our next child." Abigail said as she counted ten fingers and ten toes. "Any chance you finished the cradle?"

"I'll carve his initials and then I'll be finished. Something tells me though, our little boy is going to be happy right where he is for a while." Isaac leaned down and kissed his wife.

Abigail slept well with Ladd laying between her and Isaac. He was covered with a blue blanket Jane made. A pink one was knit too and would be saved for her future granddaughter.

Abigail woke up when Ladd was ready to nurse, but otherwise slept peacefully. When she did wake up her awake life was even better than her dreams and Abigail hadn't thought that was possible.

The sound of the gentle rustling of the leaves and the almost synchronized breathing of her husband and son were melodic.

Extended Epilogue

I am so happy you finished reading the **A Sweet Bride To Heal His Wounded Heart**, till the end!

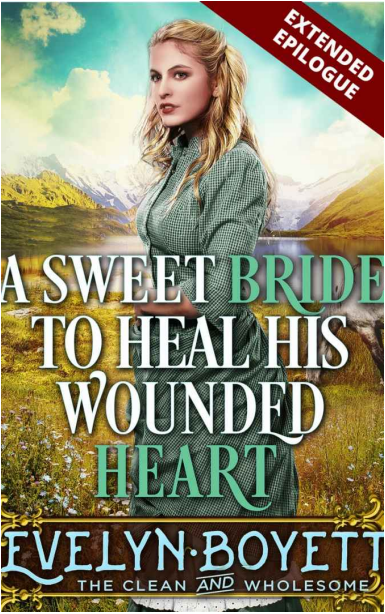
Are you aching to know what happens to our lovely couple?

Will Abigail and Isaac make the family they've always wanted?

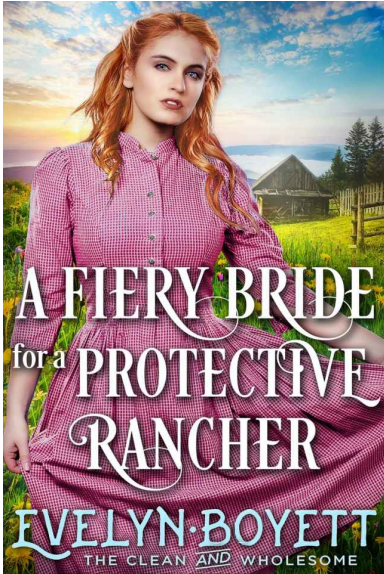
What will Abigail and Isaac do now that the nightmare is over?

Will Isaac have to choose between the love of his life and his true destiny?

Click on the picture or on the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a **BONUS, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!**



A Fiery Bride For A Protective Rancher



Chapter 1

The plains stretched out, for as far as the eye could see: yellow grasses which stirred in the wind, beneath a sky that was an impossible blue. There wasn't a single cloud in sight.

The late afternoon sun was just about to begin its descent behind the mountains, which were far off into the distance, their peaks capped with white.

Late summer was quickly ending and the air was cool and crisp. A flock of birds flew overhead, wheeling and dipping in strange formations.

Christine Howell leaned forward over her horse's neck as he galloped over the plains. She saw everything framed between his two dun-colored ears. She felt more akin to Dusty and the birds overhead than she did most people. She and Dusty moved as one, his muscles surging beneath her, his hooves thundering over the ground.

As she rode, she felt free. Her heart was wild, like the birds that flew over the plains. She didn't ever want to lose this feeling. She and her horse were two joined souls. He tossed his head, pleased to be out of the paddock.

Christine smiled to herself. She was a small woman, slim but muscular from working on her father's farm her whole life. She had freckles and green eyes. Her long red hair was loose over her shoulders, flying out behind her.

As she rode, she heard someone yelling her name. She sat back in the saddle, pulling on the reins. When she turned Dusty, she saw that her father was riding up behind her on his large black Quarter horse.

"Where have you been?" her father demanded. "We've been looking for you everywhere." His frown was etched deeply on his face. He wasn't yet an old man. His hair was still black, untouched by the frost of old age. His skin was deeply lined, however. Hard work and stress had made him dark and worn as leather.

Christine's heart was pounding. "What's happened?" she asked, figuring that something must be wrong for him to come out looking for her. Her stomach flipped, as her mind covered all of the possibilities--had one of her brothers gotten hurt? Was Delilah going into labor early? Christine had just checked on the pregnant cow before she'd left. She shouldn't have started, but it wasn't unheard of...

"What's happened?" he asked, his eyes widening. "You should be getting ready for the barn dance, over in Oak Valley. Henry will be waiting for you."

She sighed, rolling her eyes. Her father was desperate for Christine to marry. She, however, wanted her freedom. She was afraid that a man would never allow it, especially Henry Thornton. Mayor Thornton's son wanted to possess Christine. Henry could never love her. Not in any way that she wanted to be loved, at least. Her father only saw that he could provide Christine with a fancy house

and a comfortable life.

“You’re twenty years old, Christine,” he said, as though hearing her thoughts. “It’s long past the time that you should have been married and had a home of your own. Let’s go. Your Ma’s getting anxious.”

Christine couldn’t argue. There was nothing for her to do. She had nowhere to run to if she tried, and not enough money to live on. It was expected of her to do as her father told her. She knew that it was at the expense of her happiness, though. She wanted to follow her heart, which told her to run.

The two of them turned their horses towards home. Christine said nothing. Her father, Timothy Howell, had been trying to get her to marry for several years. What Christine wanted was to be left alone. She would have to change when she married. She would have to be a wife and mother. She would have to do as her husband dictated.

She wanted freedom, joy. Two things she felt while riding and roaming the plains, something she would never have time for after marriage. The Howell Farm began to come into view. She glanced over at her father. He was sitting tall in his saddle, his chin raised proudly as he looked at his farm.

The Howells had struggled for years. But they had always worked together, as a family, until their farm was successful. Christine would have gladly stayed right where she was. But her father would never allow her to remain unmarried.

They both rode into the farmyard, jumping down out of their saddles. Christine’s brother, Charles, strode out of the barn. He was already dressed for the dance, in a pair of dark slacks and a crisp

white shirt. His red hair was neatly combed and he'd shaved.

"Look who it is," he said, grinning. "Ma's fit to be tied that you aren't in there primping."

"Go on," her father ordered. "I'll take care of Dusty." He took the reins from Christine. She wanted to protest, but one look at her father's face told her not to. She relinquished the reins to him, then walked inside. It was a simple two-story house, with white siding and a blue door. Inside, it was neat and cozy, with white walls and plain wooden floorboards.

"There you are," Jane Howell said. Like her only daughter, she had red hair and green eyes. But Christine's mother had lines on her face and circles under her eyes. She always looked tired and harried for as long as Christine could remember.

There was a tub, filled with water, sitting in front of the fire. Christine's new dress was slung over the back of one of the chairs. It was a green calico print with tiny flowers scattered all over it. It was the first new dress that she'd had in several years. Her mother had proclaimed that it brought out the red of her hair. As if her hair needed to be focused on even more than it was.

Christine said nothing, while her mother forced her to remove the pair of pants that she was wearing, along with the men's shirt that she wore while working around the farm. Christine allowed herself to be scrubbed, her long red hair combed out and washed. She sat, scrubbing the dirt out from underneath her nails. By the time that she was done, the water was beginning to cool. She shivered.

"Mama?" she asked.

"Yes, dear?" her mother murmured. She was running a comb

through Christine's hair.

"Were you and Pa in love, when you married?"

"We didn't have the luxury," she replied, softly. "Love came later." She caressed Christine's cheek. "Just like I'm sure it'll come for you and Henry."

Christine laughed bitterly. Her heart felt like it was breaking in her chest. She knew that she would never fall in love with Henry.

"Hurry up," her mother said, helping her to dry off. She then grabbed the corset and petticoat, helping Christine to slip them on. Christine gripped the chair to steady herself as her mother began to do up the laces, tugging them tightly, till she could barely take a breath.

It feels like I'm being forced into a different form, she thought to herself as she gritted her teeth. *One where I'll never be able to breathe again.*

Chapter 2

William Fields owned a bit of land just outside of Oak

Valley, where he ran a cattle ranch. He was out, mending one of the fence posts that had been broken. He had just finished driving the new post into the ground and then he affixed the barbed wire to it. He tried shaking it, making sure that it was tight enough.

William stood up straight, taking his hat off. He wiped the back of his hand over his forehead, pushing back his dark curly hair, which had fallen into his face. He looked around. He'd been working for hours, and yet, it seemed like he'd gotten nowhere. There were still several more fence posts to mend. The task seemed daunting, yet someone needed to do it.

He didn't know how long he'd be able to do this. His brother, Levi, was the only other person who was helping him. He supposed he had the money to hire on more hands, yet William didn't want to have to deal with other people. It had been years since he had spent much time among people. He no longer had the need of it.

His gaze, as it often did, went straight to the massive oak tree that sat on his property. A simple wooden cross rested under it--his wife's grave marker. As he looked to where Marilyn was buried, he felt a painful twinge in his chest. The farm felt lonely without her. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stand it. It had been

three years since the accident that had taken her and the pain hadn't lessened one bit.

He let out a deep breath, adjusting his hat on his head. He heard hoofbeats in the distance, and he turned to see who was coming. His brother, Levi, was riding towards him on his black and white paint horse.

"Hey there, Brother," Levi called out as he neared. He hopped down off of his horse's back, his feet landing in the dirt with a solid thump.

"Levi," William replied grimly. His brother was still spry. Levi stood there, his back straight. When he walked, there was still a spring in his step. William felt ancient--tired. Almost as though he were moving about underwater. He was only twenty-five.

"How's it going out here?" Levi asked, his hands on his hips.

"I don't know if I can keep this up," William admitted, his eyes returning to the cross beneath the tree. "I feel like I'm stuck, and I'm struggling just to make it from day to day." All of the joy had been sucked out of his life. Where he had once found peace and a sense of pride, there was nothing. Just an endless sense of exhaustion.

"You can't keep living in the past, Will," Levi said. When William looked back at his brother, he was frowning in concern. "It's been three years since Marilyn died. You have to let go of your sorrow and grief some time. You still have a life to live, and the girls need you. Marilyn would never begrudge you some happiness."

William thought back to the day when Marilyn had been thrown off the horse. He remembered how he had run to her, as fast as his

legs would allow, but it seemed like he was moving slowly.

Marilyn had been thrown when the horse had spooked. She had landed so that her neck had broken. Then, she had lingered, dying slowly for nearly a week. William had remained by her side, making sure that she wouldn't be alone when the time came. He had waited there at her bedside, making sure that she was as comfortable as possible. He had felt his heart break as she breathed her last. And he had never been the same.

"You have those two young girls in that house with you," Levi said. "They need a mother, you know?"

They need a father, too, he thought. William tried his best, but he was no longer as present as he had once been. Their neighbor, Bessie Winslow, helped when she could.

William sighed, nodding. "I suppose you're right." He was attempting to be a parent to his two twin girls, Fern and Mable. They both looked just like their mother. Every time that he looked at them, he saw her, staring back at him. They were a constant reminder of what William had lost. He knew that he was failing them, horribly.

"Of course, I'm right," Levi shot back. "Come to the barn dance in town with me."

"The girls," William began, intending to say that he needed to be there.

"See if Mrs. Winslow will stay a bit later," Levi said, smiling. "I'm sure she won't mind."

"She probably won't," William agreed. Bessie Winslow, the elderly

neighbor who watched his girls during the day while he and Levi were working, had been offering to introduce him to some of the nice young ladies from town. He didn't think she'd mind staying a bit later, if it meant that he was finally getting out.

The last thing William wanted was to get out, he had to admit. But he also knew that he couldn't keep going on as he had been. Maybe a change of scenery would do him good.

"Alright. I'll go," he told his brother, hoping he wouldn't regret it.

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